



THE COOPERATIVE LANGUAGE LEARNING
TECHNIQUE WITH LITERATURE AS A
RESOURCE IN A MALAYSIAN ESL
CLASSROOM

BY

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ABSTRACT

Research to present effective approaches to language teaching is an ongoing movement. This study explores the notion of a learner-centred technique of learning English and explains the relevance of using literary materials as a resource for language learning. The study examines how students can have a new perspective of learning through the cooperative language learning technique and provides tasks based on literary materials as resource. This orientation of learning entails a paradigmatic shift from the transmission model of teaching to a process orientated participatory model, seeing learners as active agents in their learning. Classroom observations, interviews and a questionnaire were the instruments used in this research. The observations examined interactions under four main headings: Pedagogical Moves, Social Skills, Rhetorical Acts and Teacher Talk. Fourteen different categories were examined. The questionnaire inquired into the learners' learning preferences and the interviews and certain questions in the questionnaire probed learners' attitudes towards the use of literary materials in the ESL classroom.

The t-Test statistical analysis of the data for observations demonstrated significant differences for Pedagogical Moves, Social Skills and Rhetorical Acts. In the Teacher Talk group there was no significant difference. The analysis suggests that learners employ interactions that involve pedagogical moves, social skills and rhetorical acts for the completion of tasks under the cooperative language learning technique, while teacher talk is minimised as she facilitates language learning. The results imply that there is a positive inclination towards the learner-centred cooperative mode of language learning.

Next, the paired t-Test results for the questionnaire data indicated learners' preference for the cooperative learning technique. To analyse students' attitudes towards the use of literary materials in the language classroom, a percentage calculation indicated that 70% of the subjects preferred the inclusion of literary materials in the ESL classroom while 30% were not in favour.

There are some pedagogical implications from the findings of this research. The teaching implications provided in this study do not intend to be exhaustive but as a guide for teachers wishing to take this aspect of teaching.

ملخص البحث

إن عملية البحث لتقديم مقترحات مؤثرة في تدريس اللغة هي عملية مستمرة. تستقصي هذه الدراسة أسلوب دارس اللغة الإنجليزية وتفسر استعمال النصوص الأدبية مصدراً لتعلم اللغة. كما تبحث هذه الدراسة في كيفية بلوغ الطلبة منظوراً جديداً في التعلم من خلال أسلوب تعلم اللغة التعاوني، وتقدم إجابات تتخذ من المواد الأدبية مصدراً للتعلم. إن هذا التوجه في التعلم يستدعي تحوُّلاً منظماً في مثال التوصيل في التدريس إلى مثال يقوم على عملية مشاركة، يرى في المتعلمين عناصر فاعلة في التعلم. وكانت الوسائل المستعملة في هذا البحث تشمل المشاهدات الصفية والمقابلات والاستبيان. وكانت المشاهدات تتفحص التفاعلات التي تقع تحت أربعة أصناف رئيسة: الحركات التعليمية Pedagogical moves، المهارات الاجتماعية Social skills، الحركات التعبيرية Rhetorical acts، وكلام المدرس. وقد جرى أثناء ذلك فحص أربعة عشر صنفاً مختلفاً. كان الاستبيان يبحث في تفضيلات المتعلمين، كما كانت المقابلات وبعض الأسئلة في الاستبيان تتفحص مواقف المتعلمين نحو استعمال المواد الأدبية في صفوف تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية بوصفها لغة ثانية.

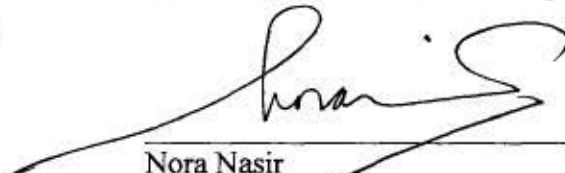
لقد أظهر التحليل الإحصائي لمواد المشاهدات اختلافات بينة في الحركات التعليمية والمهارات الاجتماعية والحركات التعبيرية. أما في كلام المدرس فلم يظهر اختلاف مهم. يشير التحليل إلى أن الدارسين يستخدمون التفاعلات التي تتضمن الحركات التعليمية والمهارات الاجتماعية والحركات التعبيرية لغرض إكمال الواجبات الواقعة تحت أسلوب تعلم اللغة التعاوني، بينما يتضاءل كلام المدرسة وهي تسهل تعلم اللغة. وتفيد النتائج بوجود ميل واضح نحو الأسلوب التعاوني المعني بالمتعلم في عملية تعلم اللغة.

ويلى ذلك أن نتائج الاختبار التائي المزدوج في مواد الاستبيان تشير إلى تفضيل المتعلمين أسلوب التعلم التعاوني. كما أن تحليل مواقف الطلبة نحو استعمال المواد الأدبية في صفوف اللغة يبين أن ٧٠٪ من المتعلمين يفضلون إدخال المواد الأدبية في صفوف تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية بوصفها لغة ثانية، بينما نجد ٣٠٪ لا يفضلون ذلك.

تشير نتائج البحث إلى بعض المضامين التعليمية. لكن المضامين التي تشير إليها هذه الدراسة لا تدعي الشمولية، بل إنها تشكل دليلاً للمدرسين الراغبين في إتباع هذه الناحية في التعليم.


APPROVAL PAGE

I certify that I have supervised and read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Human Science in English as a Second Language.




Nora Nasir
Supervisor
Date: 10/7/2000

I certify that I have supervised and read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Human Science in English as a Second Language.



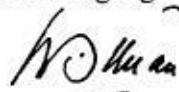
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This thesis was submitted to the Department of English Language and Literature and is accepted as partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Human Science in English as a Second Language.



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Date: 10/7/2000

DECLARATION

I hereby state that this thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. Other sources are acknowledged by proper citations giving explicit references and a bibliography is appended.

Name: Clamentine Mangalam

Signature: 

Date: 10.7.2000

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The Cooperative Language Learning Technique with Literature
as a Resource in a Malaysian ESL Classroom

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

In recent years, the Malaysian policy makers have been seeking ways to upgrade the English language proficiency levels of students and at the same time, instill in learners the love for the various genres and inculcate the reading habit. Although the realization of this need to improve the English language proficiency has spurred the resurgence of literature in the language curriculum, it has yet to reap the fruits of its implementation. Despite the fact that literary texts such as the class reader programmes are available, these have not been exploited in ways that would motivate and encourage students to take up literature as a subject in the upper forms. Rosli (1995) states that the main concern of the CRP (Class Reader Programme) is for language purposes particularly for the development of reading interests and skills. He also suggests that supplementary materials should be used in the language classroom and that teachers should provide students with the best opportunities to exploit these materials. Consequently, more constructive innovations could be introduced in the classroom as part of the procedure to further improve the implementation of the CRP as a whole.

Teachers recently interviewed by the researcher at a secondary school in Petaling Jaya, commented that students often face problems with the complexities of literature and they complain that literature is “boring”. To questions on learner-centred approaches of language learning, the teachers felt

that Malaysian school students were still not confident enough for a shift in role relationship. That is to make a change from the traditional teacher controlled learning arrangement to a more autonomous one. They say that learners prefer the security that results from a more traditional relationship with their teachers. This means that students are more comfortable with teacher-centred language teaching.

This scenario could possibly be because the methods, approaches or techniques used in the teaching of literature and language are not motivating for students in the classroom. The teachers also expressed their concern that the class readers currently used in schools were too simplified for urban students whose exposure to the English language was wider than those of the rural students. The parents of urban students are usually highly educated compared to those in the rural areas. Often, English is used as the language of communication in urban homes apart from their mother tongue.

It is pertinent then, to focus on the ways and means by which these problems can be overcome. The current study investigated the appropriateness and suitability of the cooperative learning approach in an ESL class. Cooperative language learning fosters informal language learning styles that provide supportive environments for language practice as students work together in small groups. This survey probed the possibility of the cooperative technique to be applied to language learning as a partial solution to these local problems. The technique will make use of literary materials as a source to language learning. The context in which interactions occur is an important

variable that was given primary consideration in this study. The research is based upon responses from students of a secondary school in Petaling Jaya. The study draws on the range of insights available to develop an approach appropriate and relevant to students.

Background to the Study

The history of English in Malaysia dates back to the time of Sir Francis Light (1786), when he first founded Penang. Since then English medium schools mushroomed mainly in urban areas, being built as private schools by the Christian missionaries. Today, English is no longer the medium of instruction. With the implementation of the national language policy, English schools have been phased out and since 1983, all schools have been converted to national schools, where the Malay language is used as the medium of instruction.

However, English in Malaysia is still considered a strong second language in the context of the national education system. It is taught as a compulsory subject both in the primary and secondary schools and is used extensively in tertiary education. Malaysia realises that the English language is an asset to keep, since it can provide the country with an avenue to international relations as well as a means to its advancement in the arena of science and technology (Asmah Haji Omar, 1982). Hence, it is undeniably evident that the mastery of the English language is a necessity for students, to access further education and to widen their horizon of knowledge. In certain states in the country, however, English is considered a foreign language that is merely a subject on

the curriculum and has no role in communication.

The teaching of literature in the Malaysian secondary schools has been affected by the changes in the language and education policies. The English language syllabus did not have any literature component at least until 1990 when it was introduced and incorporated into the lower secondary syllabus, merely as a class reader programme. However, the introduction of this reader programme in the lower secondary classes, has paved the way for the incorporation of literature in the teaching of English as a subject. The class readers are simplified or abridged versions of literary texts. They also include non-native texts. The introduction of these texts is a move towards developing students' language skills.

During the 1960s and early 1970s, literature in English became a relatively popular subject among students as these students had a level of competency in the English language that enabled them to process the literary texts quite successfully. Today, literature is an elective in the upper forms, and students may opt for it as an examination subject for the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) examination.

The English language, divested of its role as the medium of instruction, saw a tangential drop in its proficiency level among students of all ages and simultaneously a drastic drop in the number of students who registered for literature in English. Owing to the steady decline in the standard of English over the years in Malaysian schools, more teachers and students tend to shy

away from literature in English (Malachi, 1993).

The Curriculum Development Centre, whose main purpose is to design and develop the curriculum on a national level, implemented a new syllabus for literature in English for the upper secondary schools. The aim of the new syllabus was to develop in students an awareness of the value and pleasure of reading literary works, an appreciation and understanding of human values and of course the appreciation of the various genres.

Literature is a fruitful way of involving the learner as a whole person, and the text used is the basis for generating discussions and critical thinking in the classroom (Lazar, 1993). In the context of the ESL classroom in Malaysia, it is more appropriate to exploit literature as a resource rather than an object of study. Widdowson (1975) is against limiting the focus of literary studies to either language usage or cultural content. He believes that literature should be considered as discourse and the study of literature as “an inquiry into the way a language is used to express a reality other than that expressed by conventional means” (p 80). Moreover, it can also develop “a sharper awareness of the communicative resources of the language being learned” (Widdowson, 1975: 83).

Having described the standing of English and literature in the school curriculum, a short description of the school system may be necessary to enlighten the reader.

The secondary school consists of two levels, that is, the lower secondary classes which is made up of pupils studying in Form One to Form Three, and the upper secondary classes consisting of students in Form Four and Five. The secondary education begins after six years of primary schooling. Figure 1.1 indicates the five levels in the secondary schools in Malaysia. It also illustrates the levels at which the reader programme may be used, as well as the levels where literature is an elective, namely, where students may opt to study literature.

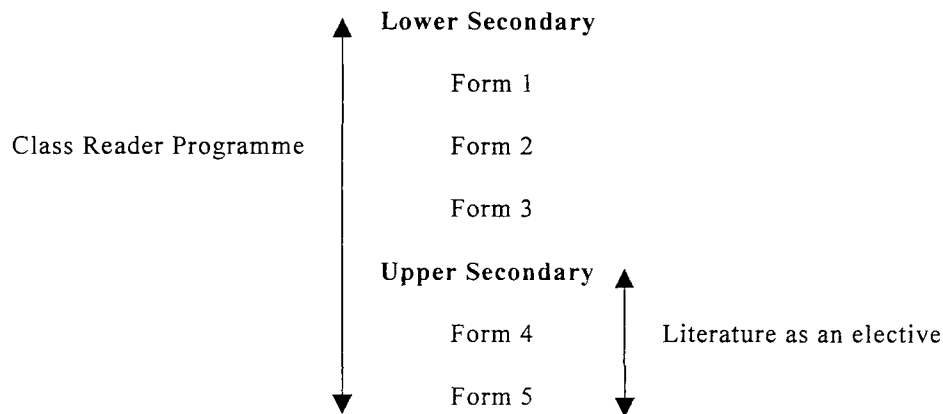


Fig. 1.1 An illustration of the levels in secondary schools, the levels where the Class Reader Programme (CRP) is used and the levels where literature is an optional subject.

Statement of the Problem

English language learning consists of two processes: language learning and language acquisition. Language acquisition is a subconscious process whereby language is learnt through exposure in naturally occurring language learning situations (Ellis, 1994). The language learning process refers to the conscious process of learning a language. The long-term effect of language learning is dependent upon opportunities available for language practice (Sudhakaran, 1999). English language learning especially the acquisition of English, as a

second language is an area that is problematic and difficult for non-native learners, as is the situation in Malaysia. This scenario is evident from various newspaper reports.

The importance of reading for the acquisition of the English language cannot be over-emphasised. A recent survey by the National Library of Kuala Lumpur, shows that although 87% of the population above ten years of age read, of this 79% of them read only newspapers (The Star July 4th 1997). Another recent newspaper report stated that a majority of Malaysian students leave the school system with a poor grasp of English despite having been exposed to the language for eleven years of primary and secondary education. In support of this, Dr. Gaudard, a lecturer at the Education Faculty in University Malaya, says that many students who enter universities are not competent enough in the English language (The Star March 7th 1999). This supports the study by Malachi (1993), that states that there is a decline in the proficiency level of students in the country. He argues that due to this decline in the standard of English, Malaysian students and teachers shy away from literature learning.

Objectives of the Study

In view of the above problems, the research then undertook to study and identify the benefits of the cooperative learning technique as an approach to language learning. It also studied the variables that increased interaction among students to produce learner-centred learning. Subsequently, the insights gained from the survey of the learning preferences and attitudes of

the students towards the cooperative technique may enable the building up of learner-centred teaching approaches to cultivate in students self-directed learning and independence at a younger stage of their school life.

Research Questions

This study attempts to answer the following questions:

- i. How effective is the cooperative learning approach in the language classroom?
- ii. What are students learning preferences and their attitude towards the cooperative technique of learning?
- iii. What are students' attitudes towards literature as a language learning and teaching resource?

Rationale of the Study

Keeping in focus the benefits of the cooperative language learning technique, the study aimed to examine how students could be encouraged to have a new perspective of learning. The researcher explored methodologies and approaches of teaching that were learner-centred rather than teacher-centred. The study also aimed at the possibility of enabling students to become autonomous learners instead of being "sausage casings" into which knowledge is stuffed. A further consideration was to include literature as a legitimate and valuable resource for language learning. Literature, which speaks to the heart as much as to the mind, provides authentic material with both intellectual as well as emotional colour that can make fuller contact with the students' own lives (Lazar, 1993). Therefore, the study examined how literature texts could

best be used in the ESL classroom as materials that encouraged students to discover not only literary significance, but also develop language proficiency by means of cooperative learning activities and discussions. Consequently, the researcher hoped that students would have a new perspective of learning through the cooperative technique and the use of literary texts. Subsequently, the findings of this research can be translated into linguistic and pedagogic terms to produce learner-centred activities, that sought to generate student interest and participation of learners, and to encourage a positive attitude among teachers in the use of literature texts in the language learning/teaching paradigm.

In schools, the students' level of language proficiency in a class may be a mixed one and thus the methodology employed in teaching, should be one that is best suited to a mixed level group - by using interactive learning styles. A teacher may need to be flexible in her approach and be willing to adapt to the needs of the students and gradually draw them into participatory activities, hence, creating interesting and suitable conditions of learning.

Significance of the Study

Since the cooperative technique in learning is not popular as yet in the Malaysian secondary school context, this study could be a valuable contribution towards this end. The technique departs from the current communicative language teaching and learning approaches in that, particular situations where learners practice language forms and functions which are thought to be useful for communication are not prescribed. It is also hoped

that the study will encourage learners and teachers towards a more positive attitude in the use of the technique in both the literature and the language classroom. This research studied the learning/teaching paradigm which assumes that effective language teaching occurs when well planned activities, are combined with good techniques of teaching, methodology and professionalism, whilst instruction is learner-centred.

Cooperation also affords the opportunity for the students to discuss and reflect upon the activities and thereby enhance the learning process. With this technique learners will develop a closer relationship with teachers and students. As such, the technique, when applied in the classroom is open to discussion which reveal motives, feelings and thoughts and involves a greater deal of trust among team members. The language that evolves during these activities is shared by its immediate users (Nunan, 1992). Cooperative language learning will also enable learners to increase their awareness of learning.

The learning and teaching attitude indicated by the cooperative technique focuses on individual learner creativity and encourages the teacher to facilitate and stimulate independent learning. There is collaborative arrangement such as group work, which encourages learners to assume some of the responsibilities for their own learning (Richards & Lockhart, 1994). The researcher thus feels that Malaysian students should be encouraged to become independent learners and the cooperative technique of learning is ideal to promote self-reliance among learners, whereby they can assume some

responsibility towards learning independence.

The cooperative learning orientation entails a paradigmatic shift from the transmission model of teaching to a process-oriented, participatory model, seeing learners as active agents in their learning. With this technique, the researcher believes that students will be able to develop their language particularly through language socialisation. It cannot be denied that learners are an important resource for their own collective learning, and this resource can be accessed through collaboration, cooperation and experiential learning too. Collaborative learning can help learners use what they already know to go beyond what they currently think through discussions and the sharing of knowledge. This technique will also create an environment in which learners and teachers are teaching and learning from each other in an equitable way and it essentially incorporates principles of learner-centredness. The approach then, is a language socialisation perspective where language and cultural knowledge are viewed as being learned together as parts of the learning of a cultural activity. Tasks in cooperative learning are designed to be within the capacity of the learners and are guided by the teachers. The course interaction and series of tasks are structured to enable learners to participate in the activity. Also, there is cooperative interaction of the teacher and the students. Their progress is reflected in the increase in control of the activity as they performed their tasks more confidently and successfully.

The researcher, while having elaborated on the use of the cooperative learning technique which entails students working together to achieve common

learning goals, employed literary texts as resources for language enrichment.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

To support this study, an extensive search of the literature related to the present topic was made. Only those closely relevant and as recent scholastic studies were examined and the knowledge extracted. Some of the major studies with underpinnings for the present study were scrutinised. They were learning and teaching, literature in language teaching and the cooperative learning technique.

Language Learning

Language learning and teaching today is moving beyond the traditional four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing to include a new and indispensable fifth skill of thinking. This involves going beyond the mechanics of grammar practice and repetitions and reinforcements, into an area where students' reactions and responses are of utmost importance. The learner is encouraged to stretch her language ability beyond levels, to expand and experiment with the target language. Sir Winston Churchill once said - "I am always willing to learn but I do not always like to be taught" - is an apt saying to begin this review with.

Learning involves a processing through construction and reconstruction of meaning that is personally significant and relevant to the learner (Williams, 1989). Reappraising old information to bring it in line with the new is what constitutes learning. A key factor for learning to take place is an understanding of the aims. A clarification of this factor is one offered by Brown (1988) who differentiates between pedagogic language learning and