

Integrating Language Learning Strategies to Promote Active-Cooperative Language Learning

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Abstract

This paper emphasizes the effect of integrating strategies and teaching methods in the language learning of high school students in Tirana and Shkoder.

The study makes the comparison between the traditional way of teaching and the active - cooperative learning, in order to decide on the learners' behavior towards learning.

The following research questions guide this study:

- 1) Does a particular way of teaching encourage greater attention among language learners?
- 2) Does active - cooperative learning create positive attitude among language learners?

This study follows a qualitative research design. A qualitative approach was chosen

because we tend to see how the learners' attitudes towards the language learning change through the comparison between the traditional and active – cooperative teaching learning and how the integrated strategies may affect learning.

The study involved a sample of 60 students from the high schools in Tirana and Shkoder, who ranged from 14 to 16 years of age. These learners were from similar socioeconomic backgrounds but from different geographic areas. There were also two teachers who taught them English as a foreign language.

The importance of the study lies in the fact that it may help the language teachers to decide which teaching method is most suited to promote cooperative learning and how interactive strategies may affect the second language learners' achievements and how they will affect their behavior in the language classroom. The findings from this study led to the following conclusions:

The results of the study show that interactive teaching strategies have a strong impact on the students' motivation which leads them towards active – cooperative learning. The application of these strategies can be very effective for the teacher and rewarding for the students, hence helping the students improve their language achievements according to the requirements of the Common European Framework of Languages (CEFR, 2001)¹.

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

To some students, classroom environment inspires and encourages them towards great success in learning a foreign language. Other students have lack of motivation and interest, regardless of teaching methods and classroom environment. So in this study we want to know how interactive teaching methods and strategies affect the learning process and the motivation of students in making learning active.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to identify if interactive teaching methods and strategies that have been used by the teachers in the respective schools have a positive influence on the learning process. We will examine existing research in this area and make observations of classrooms in the high school in Tirana and Shkoder. Using this information we will look for similarities between teaching strategies and student motivation levels. The results of this study will be used to develop more interactive strategies during the language teaching process in order to promote the students' active – cooperative learning in the language classroom (Bonwell, C.C and J. A. Elison, 1991), who state that active learning lead to cooperative learning. This kind of learning encourages the learners to be autonomous and productive.

Research Questions

The following research questions guide this study:

- 1) Does a particular way of teaching encourage greater attention among language learners?
- 2) Does active - cooperative learning create positive attitude among language learners and how it helps motivation?

Rationale

Some researchers have noticed that there is a lack of student motivation in the teaching and learning process

¹ <http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/>

because they are not so much involved in this process. These students feel bored and neglected at the same time when they are set a certain task to accomplish on a certain time because the task is not motivating and challenging, and the language learners are not involved that much as to feel like the language class. Other researchers have cited student's work habits especially lack of effort (Glasser 1986)² as a crucial motivational problem. He emphasized the fact that school is not motivating them in the learning process. Alderman (1999) says that students fail to do high-quality work at school because the school does not promote active cooperative teaching and learning.

Active learning needs effective – integrated strategies in order to encourage students' motivation. So teachers need on-going professional development in order to attract their learners in their teaching process. Effective – integrating strategies will improve students' achievements in learning the foreign language.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Knowing and applying teaching and learning strategies are decisive in the learners' motivation during the language class. O'Malley et al (1983); and Brown et al., (1983) state that the learners use some strategies in order to use the new knowledge in the best way they can. They obtain, store, retrieve and use the information in order to convey their thought in a particular language setting.

In order to do the above actions right the learners use some strategies: repetition, to learn vocabulary and use it in a proper way; guessing and inference to go to the right meaning. Tarone (1977) and Rubin (1981) quote that the learners need to use their linguistic and communicative knowledge to handle the conversation. So they make use of synonyms, use of paraphrasing, use of gestures and other techniques in order to be understood. Wong – Fillmore (1976) state that learners are able to handle the conversation when they make use of the following language patterns: opening and closing a conversation, pausing, getting and giving and keeping turns, and requesting assistance. Tarone (1977) emphasizes the idea that learners may use the strategy of avoiding words, phrases or topics when they do not feel safe and secure in the stream of communication. Such strategies encourage them to learn through difficulties and survive in the conversation.

Apart from linguistic strategies, the social strategies play an important role in learning a foreign language. Rubin and Wenden (1987) say that social strategies expose the language learners to the use of language. The learners use different techniques and activities to apply their knowledge in a certain language setting. Whereas Wong-Fillmore (1976) state that these strategies motivate the learners to be involved in the learning process. Having all this research in mind, the English teachers encourage the language learners to learn the language in groups and act as if they know one another for ages. The learners learn how to obtain, store and retrieve the new information in the foreign language (Wong-Fillmore (1976). Rubin (1981), the founder of social strategies, encourages some activities that help sustain the conversation. These activities include: create situation with natives, initiate conversation with peers in the language classroom (Rubin, 1981). Wong-Fillmore (1976) promotes use of language labs, listening to radio/television, watching movies or parties or advertisements, or reading extra books.

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

The participants in the study were from public high schools in Tirana and Shkoder. The high school students were in grade ten and eleven. The students varied in ages between 14 and 16 years old. In tenth grade, there were approximately 30 students. In the eleventh grade, there were approximately 30 students. The distribution of male and female students was approximately 50% male and 50% female throughout these classes. The schools present a variety of different socioeconomic levels of students. There were also two high school teachers participating in the study.

Procedures used for Data Analysis

A qualitative research was followed for this study, thus the instruments used in this research were observation (Appendix A) and student survey (Appendix B). We followed several steps to carry this research. For the first instrument (observation) we selected the schools to gather the right data and then analyzed them and came to useful conclusions for the young teachers.

The other instrument used in this research was student survey. The student survey addressed two major purposes. First, through the student survey we examine the attitude of selected high school students for the effectiveness and the impact of active – cooperative learning and the integrative strategies on second learning acquisition. The second purpose was to collect additional data concerning the students' attitude and their behavior towards the learning process. Before the surveys were distributed to the students we trained the teachers how to instruct their students to fill them in. Then the students were given the surveys by the teachers so that the students would take

² William **Glasser** in Control Theory in the Classroom (1986)

the surveys by themselves without the influence of their peers. The teachers collected the surveys and returned them to the researchers for analysis after three weeks.

The survey took approximately 15 minutes to complete in class and was administered and collected by the classroom teacher. These surveys were collected, but were not analyzed until after the classroom observations were completed (three weeks).

Data Analysis

In this step, all sources of data are compared as individual units and sorted the data into categories and themes based on the two surveys filled by the students. The collection of data provided by the answers of the students during the students' survey and the answers from the observation session gave us the opportunity to interpret them according to the students' and the teachers' personal experiences, educational theory and literature references.

We followed the definition of the term observation, which is defined as "the systematic description of events, behaviors, and artifacts in the social setting chosen for study" Marshall and Rossman (1989). Observations enabled us to describe existing situations using the five senses, providing a "written photograph" of the situation under study (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993). Using the information gained from the observation will help us look for similarities between teaching strategies and student motivation levels. The results of this study will be used to develop more integrative and effective strategies in an active – cooperative teaching and learning, and at the same time it will find answers to the students' motivation and their behavior towards language learning.

In the observed classes students responded to the classroom atmosphere that was set up by the teacher as well as to the teachers' style and their expertise in class. The students attested that the classroom environment and the teachers' teaching methods have a great impact on the students' achievements in learning the language. The use of different integrated strategies and activities promote students' motivation. During the observation classes the teachers focused mostly on the following: (a) student behavior towards learning English and (b) material selection to meet the students' interests and needs.

Focus on Student Behavior towards Learning English

Eralda (a student that was observed) believes that the students' experiences both in their class and with previous teachers have had a great impact on their motivation to learn. To her thought, Ana (one of the teachers) has developed a very structured classroom. During the observation, Eralda noted that the students appeared very comfortable and relaxed with the class and the activities launched by their teacher. Ana, on her side approves that having a class that meets your students' expectations reduces the amount of stress being placed on students. Encouragement plays a major role in her overall teaching. Ana's philosophy on creating a safe and warm learning environment can be seen in student responses on the survey. Activities given by her were so helpful that motivated the students' learning and changed their behavior and belief towards learning English.

Focus on Material Selection to Meet Students' Interests and Needs. We were very much interested on the use of materials that affect the students' lives. In the classes that were observed, the teachers made an effort to allow the students to find connections between their lives and the material that is being taught. Selecting materials to meet the students' interests and needs will motivate them more to learn the language.

The student's survey of the 60 participants in the high schools in Tirana and Shkoder showed that 56 of them indicated that the teacher made the lesson enjoyable as they went to the language class to learn for fun.

One of the students, who participated in the survey (Arjan), stated that: "I enjoy working in groups; it is less stressing and makes the lesson interesting". The next student (Tonin) who participated in the survey said: I did not really enjoy the English class and I do not use the language correctly. Actually, I am a student in another class and do not belong to the classes that were assigned for this research. Once I learned from my best friend that there was going to be a survey on motivating students to language learning, I requested my teacher to let me go to Ana's class. With the consent of the headmaster of the school and the consent of both teachers I took part in the observed class. Since then the way teacher Ana taught us I love English and I will finish the studies at this class. She changed my behavior towards learning and through her integrating strategies and teaching methods she motivated me to learn English for my future. In a way she changed my life.

From the observations in the final exam the students that were involved in the research did better. Their achievements were higher to the expectations of the teachers.

Conclusion

Teachers are constantly on search for new ways to improve their teaching methods and the effectiveness of the interactive strategies in promoting active – cooperative learning in the classroom. This research provides teachers with the interactive techniques that affect the language acquisition.

In order to encourage student motivation and active – cooperative learning, teachers should focus on the following areas. First, creating an inspiring classroom environment will motivate the language learners to collaborate actively with their peers and as a result, they will have the expected achievements in the language learning process. Second, the use of integrated strategies and the interactive learning techniques will help students work in groups, and will help them get be more involved in the learning process. Learning how to apply the integrated strategies and the active – cooperative learning the learners will remain successfully in the conversation. Third, the selection and use of teaching materials will promote the students’ interests in their lives. It will encourage ardent discussion among the learners. So they become active and cooperative learners. In this way, the students will feel that what they are learning is important to their future life. Finally, the teachers should create a relaxed learning atmosphere in class in order for them to feel like learning the language for fun. The relaxed atmosphere in the language class will make learning for fun and learning in this way will store the new knowledge in the long term memory. Therefore, they will be more creative and thoughtful in their learning and consequently, they will perform well in the foreign language.

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Appendix A

Student Survey

Grade: _____

Class: _____

School: _____

Please tick all the answers that apply:

1. In this class I :

- am very active
- complete all my assignments on time
- am given a prize by the teacher
- ask questions when I am not sure
- enjoy learning the materials offered by the teacher
- have fun during the learning process

1. I like this class because:

- It’s motivating.
- It’s interesting and challenging.
- The teacher makes it fun.
- I can use the material in certain language settings. .
- It’s enjoyable.
- We do a variety of different activities.

2. I do not like this class because:

- it’s boring
- it’s not motivating
- it’s not encouraging
- the information I learn is not to my liking
- the topics discussed in class does not concern me
- I stay in class just because I have to

3. To your point of view what kind of student are you in the English class:

- Outstanding
- Above Average
- Average
- Below Average
- Poor

Appendix B

Classroom Observation

Teacher Behavior in the Language Class	Yes	No
Teacher keeps class under control		
Teacher uses humor in class		
Teacher expresses her enthusiasm to the students' progress		
Teacher connects the lesson to the students' interests and needs		
Teacher sets high expectations for the students		
Teacher uses her teaching time in a proper way		
Teacher gives the proper time to the students' talking time		
Teacher encourages the learners to collaborate in an active way		
Teacher creates a very warm classroom environment		
Teacher tests the students' achievements in language learning		

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