

Building the Culture of Cooperation among UAE University Female Students

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Abstract

Throughout the years, research and experience have captured various contexts in which cooperative learning has been implemented and reflected. In the boundaries of a classroom as a learning community, cooperative learning has positively influenced the learning and teaching of multifarious learners and teachers. Hence, the study aims to explore and give account on an authentic experience in UAE University in Al Ain, UAE. The implementation of systematic cooperative strategies has significantly and constructively left its touches of social interaction, cultural responsiveness, and improved learning. Therefore, the researcher narrates the numerous ways through which she has witnessed a positive alteration in the learners' attitude and learning through the consistent application of cooperative learning. The study findings are making good friends, classmates' willingness to assist their group members in finishing their work, offering helpful suggestions and ideas, sharing ideas and saving time, constructive interaction among students, are advantages of the cooperative learning strategies. However, other challenges were faced by the students during the process of cooperative learning strategies such as lack of communication among the students. More specifically, some students prefer to control the speech among the group members. Other challenges are that some students' dependency and careless of their responsibilities among their group members influenced negatively on their task achievement. The researcher anticipates and hopes that the findings will facilitate further research on cooperative learning and differentiated instruction in the UAE

1. Introduction

Cooperative learning is a student-centered and teacher-facilitated instructional strategy. Students work in a group and they are accountable for their own learning and group members' learning (Johnson, Johnson & Holubec, 1993). Students communicate with their classmates in their group to work on their tasks and achieve their shared goal. Slavin (1996) argues that a crucial aspect of cooperative learning is group work and its shared goals. Cooperative learning advances critical thinking skills, promote motivation and encourage interpersonal relations such as peer relations (Slavin, 1985). Cooperation is working together to interact, understand, and achieve shared goals (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1994). It assists in building collective effort to accomplish shared goals. Construction of knowledge involves behavioral, cognitive, social and affective aspects (McCombs, 2000). The conception of cooperation started to emerge as an influential tool in the educational field. The focus on group work in educational fields means that instructional strategies emphasize cooperative learning rather than individual learning (Kagan & Kagan, 2009).

Cooperative learning leads to success of different students' plans and projects. These educational plans shape learners, teachers, and school leaders' ideologies and personalities. It provides teachers with strategies that assist them in creating friendly and engaging learning environment. Students feel safer when they work on their research projects, which promotes students' knowledge and their skill base, with their classmates especially for unprepared students to undertake their tasks on their own (Walker, 1996). Students who participate in group work, reveal cooperative attitudes among their classmates, and provide constructive feedback, receive higher grades in their courses (Tsay, 2010)

Learning English as a second or foreign language often associated with anxiety and uncertainty for students. Therefore, it is crucial to create environment that combats the negativity to enhance students' language acquisition and social communication with their classmates and their teachers. It is significant to utilize the role of cooperative learning strategies in creating an influential ESL/EFL learning and teaching experiences that overcome students' challenges, and assists them to gain rich learning experience.

Social communication skills are enhanced with cooperative learning strategies. Training students in the social skills required to work collaboratively. Some students do not have these skills. Even though cooperation is encouraged, competition is treasured in schools. Students in their groups are cheered to contribute in their group in order to maintain their group success and task achievement. In the same time, group members are asked to reflect their cooperation experience as individuals. Instructors try to ensure students' awareness of healthy, positive atmosphere of interaction cooperatively in their groups (Cohen, 1994). Developing strategies to manage conflict before it arises is a significant matter of cooperative learning process. The study purpose is exploring the impact of cooperative learning on students' attitudes and learning.

2.Statement of the Problem

In foreign and second language teaching and learning contexts, multiple challenges impend the learning which leads to students' resistance to cooperate, worry, self-centeredness and frustration. To contest the negativity in students' attitudes, the learning experience should be authentic and emotionally rewarding, and the content should be skillfully taught and enjoyable. The study research questions are as followed: 1. What is the positive impact of utilizing cooperative learning strategies with students? 2. What are the students' challenges toward cooperative learning experience in their classroom?

3.Significance of the Study

The study provides an insightful account of how the integration of cooperative learning strategies in universities has positive outcomes in student attitude towards their learning experiences. Therefore, the study will address various learning difficulties and behavioral issues through the context of cooperative strategies. The study findings will thus provide more insight and depth to the scholarly research and literature in the field of cooperative learning as it will provide relevance to theory, reflecting how cooperative learning can positively influence students' attitude and learning. The study will serve as a base for additional future research in the field of cooperative learning in the UAE. The study identified some factors that make cooperative learning a friendly learning context to attain knowledge and manifest social and cultural skills in their academic discipline by avoiding the students' challenges with cooperative learning strategies.

4.Methodology

Instruments

The data collected through classroom observation and semi-structured interviews with students. These forms of data collection endorsed some flexibility to deal with any significant point that appeared during the interview periods.

Participants

Seventeen female students who were taken three Educational courses (Assessment in Early Childhood, Family, Community, Culture and Early Childhood, and Classroom Environment in Elementary Education) from UAE University, participated in this study. The students were undergraduate students with various specializations in Education, and Humanities and Social Science Colleges.

5. Data Collection and Analysis

To minimize distortion of the natural flow of the classroom, the researcher made sure that some measures were considered. Therefore, the researcher did not begin using the cooperative learning strategies with the target classes until the first five weeks had passed. The purpose of delaying the strategies introduction was to allow enough time to create good rapport with

students. The data collection process persisted for nearly two months. The researcher, who was the instructor of the three educational courses at the time of the study, collected classroom notes while students were working collaboratively in their classroom activities which were designed and assigned in accordance with the cooperative learning strategies. The interviews were conducted with six students from the three courses.

The qualitative approach nature utilized in this study endorsed the researcher to continue collecting data during the data analysis process. The interview procedure assisted the researcher to collect supporting data and analyze it to find the results. This flexibility of data collection and analysis was due to the nature of the methodology used which was interactive, reactive or cyclical in nature. It permitted the researcher to go forward and backward during the data analysis and data collection when it needed (Weade & Green,1989). The data collection nature process directed the researcher to mainly employ a qualitative approach to analyze the data (Creswell, 2003, 2005).

6.Results and Discussion

The study provided an insightful account of how the integration of cooperative learning strategies in universities has positive outcomes in student attitude towards their learning experiences, and addressed various learning difficulties and behavioral issues through the context of cooperative strategies. This section presents some of the interview analysis to its themes and the observation based on the research questions.

Interpersonal Relationship and Friendship

Some students claimed that through the cooperative learning, they have made good friends. Similarly, Gunderson and Johnson (1980) stated that cooperative learning group could promote positive relationships towards their classmates. As Maitha remarked, "*the benefit of our group work is creating close relationships between us as classmates. Group work made us friends. I really liked team work*"

Assistance and Work Distribution

Some students indicated that their classmates were willing to assist their group members in finishing their work and if they did not know how to do it. Moza remarked, *“The benefits we have from team work is helping each other if we didn’t understand what to do, and dividing the work between us”*.

However, some students faced some challenges in distributing their work among them and collaborating as Aman commented, *“It is challenging to divide the work between us. How can we do that?”* Other students emphasized the conflict that appeared during their collaboration as Doha commented, *“When I cooperate with my team, there were some hidden problems. For instance, the presentation work was not divided equally. Doha explained in details her annoyance of the fake collaboration by stating that, “A day ago, my part was changed after we discussed and divided our parts. My previous part was given to my classmate”*.

Students’ dependency and Irresponsibility

Some students’ dependency and careless of their responsibilities among their group members could influence negatively on their task achievement as Jamila commented, *“Some students only talk. They make pressure on us because they do not do their parts”*, which some students thought that their classmates’ irresponsibility is the key problem of not achieving their task on time as Maitha commented, *“There were actions of irresponsibility of doing assigned duties which I think affected our communication”*

Lack of communication among students

One of the aims of the cooperative learning is enhancing cooperative learning among classmates. Students’ awareness of interacting among their team members in a healthy, positive environment is essential to ensure the success of the task and goal achievement. Even though instructors try to train their students to collaborate in their group, lack of communication among the students is arising issue as Maitha remarked, *“there was a weak communication between us. There was less sharing of ideas”* and Moza emphasized, *“The most challenging aspect of our group work is lack of communication between team members”*.

Ideas share or Speech control

Some students indicated that their group members gave them lots of helpful suggestions and ideas. As Amna commented, *“Working in group helps us to share ideas and facilitate the process of collecting data for our research”*. However, other students prefer to control the speech among the group members as Alyazia commented, *“Some people might take more than their share of the discussion by talking too often, asserting superiority, telling lengthy stories, or not letting others finish”*, which raises the conflict among the group members and delays the work until they solve their conflict and make agreement on the procedure of conducting their task. Some students use their sense of humor to show the dominating students the need to respect others’ opinions and their right to share their ideas as Alyazia commented, *“Sometimes humor can be used to discourage people from dominating”*.

Overcoming Shyness and passivity in classroom

Some students are shy to participate in their classroom as Alyazia commented, *“Others may rarely speak because they have difficulty getting in the conversation”*. Therefore, cooperative learning strategies could encourage the students to interact with their classmates as Alyazia remarked, *“Students, who have difficulty talking in class, speak in a small group. More students had a chance to participate in class”*. Cooperative learning strategies could be utilized in large classroom management as Alyazia stated, *“Talking in groups can help overcome the passivity of a large class”*

Time Management

The ideal purpose of cooperative learning is sharing ideas and saving time while conducting the whole task by different group members as Jamila commented, *“Group work helps us to achieve our work in short time, with different ideas that we shared between each other”*.

However, in some cases, implementing cooperative learning strategies could put students in more confusion with their work, as Alyazia commented, *“while participants are still figuring out the work and their role in the group, the group may experience false starts and circular discussions, and decisions may be postponed. Too many interesting side stories can be obstacles to group progress”* even though the instructor had explained in details their responsibilities in achieving their task. Thus, the issue is students’ missing some instruction during the instructor’s explanation as Moza emphasized, *“Some of us will know what we have to do but the other don’t know that is the most challenging thing in group work”*

7. Discussion and Conclusion

Due to the advantages of cooperative learning in shaping students’ perceptions, interaction, attitudes and achievement, it is found that applying constructive and systematic cooperative learning can positively impact the process of ESL learning in terms of behavior, attitude and learning readiness. The role of systematic cooperative strategies in teaching English as a foreign or second language is significant in creating a positive learning atmosphere that assists students acquire English within a frame that is socially and culturally enriching, and academically rewarding. The study sheds the light on the effectiveness of cooperative learning as a practice, portraying how student-centered, enriching, inspiring, and student – friendly cooperative learning activities can

be.

The study specified some factors that make cooperative learning a friendly learning context to attain knowledge and manifest social and cultural skills in their academic discipline by avoiding the students' challenges with cooperative learning strategies. The study implies using specific strategies with constructive cooperative learning that can assist teachers effectively manage their classes and address their students' behavioral and learning issues. Accordingly, more programs, management and remedial techniques can be generated from and based on the study findings. With this, the study can significantly contribute to the systematic and constructive application of cooperative learning. Further studies would be essential to investigate ways in which cooperative learning strategies utilized for effective differentiated instruction.

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