

THE ROLE OF POSITIVE INTERDEPENDENCE IN A MULTICULTURAL SECOND LANGUAGE CLASSROOM



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Abstract

This study explored the role of Positive Interdependence in a multicultural second language classroom of advanced level students from The English and Foreign Languages University. As a student, I have been a part of many group activities, and I have experienced a lot of situations where the students did not find it easy to contribute to the task at hand. This is because they have found the materials quite different from their cultural contexts, and also some of them did not find it compulsory to contribute as they could rely on other group members. To solve this situation, I have carried out an intervention study, and activities based on positive interdependence which catered to their cultural needs were given to the students. Questionnaire, classroom observation, and semi-structured interviews were the sources of data collection. It was found that the students liked tasks based positive interdependence, and felt that it gave everybody in the group the required motivation and confidence to perform for its success. This shows that there is a need for positive interdependence to make each learner feel he could contribute in a group work, especially in today's multicultural classrooms.

Keywords: Collaborative Learning, Cooperation, Culture, Positive Interdependence.



Introduction

This study is a product of a series of experiences I had when I was pursuing my master's course in The English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad. As a student here, I was a member of many groups in which collaborative learning was supposed to take place, but several times I have observed that not many students were interested to take part in the activities. As a result, only few students used to end up taking the entire load on their shoulders. This continued for such a large amount of time that I wanted to find a solution to this problem, because I was at the receiving end most of the times. Sometimes I have tried to contribute a little to the group by holding back some information I knew just to make sure that other members also show the same amount of responsibility from their side in completing the task. But the sad part to this strategy was that I had ended up being called as an unfriendly person who was not willing to share the knowledge with his friends. After facing all this, time has passed and I have entered into my fourth semester where dissertation was an option for those who were willing to take up research later in their academic lives. Hence, I had taken up research during that time, and began to read some books on Collaborative learning. That introduced me to the five basic principles of Collaborative Learning that Johnson & Johnson (1989) discussed in their book. I have understood that in order for a lesson to be collaborative, these five basic elements are essential and need to be included. They are: Positive Interdependence, Individual Accountability, Face-To-Face Promotive Interaction, Social Skills and Group Processing.

But to my surprise, I have recognised that these principles were not followed by a lot of my teachers when assigning collaborative tasks. There were two aspects that I have discovered that were helping in the low performance of certain groups. Firstly, the students were usually given the choice of choosing their group members, and mostly only good friends have chosen to be in a single group. The result was that all the top students ended up being a part of one or two groups, and naturally, the tasks were like a cake walk to them. On the other hand, all the average or not so brilliant students ended up being in one group, and handling the tasks was not an easy job for them. Secondly, not all the students felt it



was necessary for them to contribute to the task. In other words, it was not compulsory for them to participate as there was always an option of relying on somebody else in the group.

Research Framework, Strategy and Procedures

To know the above situations better, I have decided to carry out a needs analysis test to move forward with my dissertation. So, I had prepared a questionnaire with some open-ended and closed-ended questions to get the responses from the learners, and conducted some informal interviews with them. The results have helped me in understanding the situation from a different perspective. The first thing turned out to be true that many students were not participating as it was not mandatory for them to do so. This has made me realise that Positive Interdependence should be tried out with them so that the burden can be shared by all the students equally. Since I was new to research, not even once I had thought that majority of the foreign students might face some difficulty with the materials that were used. Many classes that I have attended were a combination of lots of foreign students, and also Indian students who were from different corners of the country. To put it precisely, ours was a multicultural classroom, and many of the materials used were quite new to the foreign students in terms of content, and hence they were mostly not interesting to them.

Accordingly, I have decided to prepare materials with Positive Interdependence that could cater to the needs of this multicultural classroom. As Culture and Positive Interdependence are involved together, I would like to call it “Cultural Positive Interdependence”. This was a little difficult task to perform for me. I have planned to move from more familiar texts to less familiar ones in this regard. Hence, the first set of materials was related to some of the world famous personalities who played a prominent role in creating history somewhere in this world. Later, I have chosen a list of some of the top world famous songs that the students could have listened to at some point in their lives. The plan was to make sure that no student should be at an advantage because of the familiarity with the text. This would make all the learners feel that they are in the same boat.



At the final stage of materials production, I have decided to introduce authentic materials that were specific to one particular culture. Here, I wanted the students who are familiar with the texts to explain it to the students who are not familiar with them in a positive interdependent task. The plan was to do it in a cycle so that everyone's culture was given prominence in the classroom. The purpose was to promote cultural harmony and to establish mutual respect towards the culture of each other.

Using these materials, different kinds of activities based on Positive Interdependence were prepared. Some of the activities were developed to ensure that the group is united around a common goal. Some other activities were produced to make sure that each member of the group has only a part of the information, or resources necessary for his or her task. Later, the members would be asked to combine their resources so that the group accomplishes its goal. Also, in some activities, each member was assigned complementary and interconnected roles that show the responsibilities required by the groups to fulfil the common task. Every individual activity was designed to make the students realise that they can achieve their learning goals if, and only if, all the members of their group also achieve their goals.

After the materials production, an intervention study was carried out for a span of one week. Since the duration of the dissertation was only four months, I had thought that this amount of intervention would be sufficient to do this study. After the intervention, questionnaires were administered to the students who were twenty in number, and semi-structured interviews were also conducted based on random sampling. During the intervention, classroom observation was also carried out by me.

Results

After analysing the questionnaire, classroom observation notes, and after coding the semi-structured interviews into various themes, the results were obtained which were very encouraging to me. Most of the students responded positively to this study, and as a result, it yielded a satisfactory outcome. Many had said that some of the common problems they



faced before were not there in the activities when cultural positive interdependence was present. There were some interesting opinions of the students in the open-ended questions that were put to them in the questionnaire.

As Kagan (2007) said, in positive interdependence, students find the contributions of each other helpful and hope their teammates have good ideas. This thought of his was supported by the following statements made by the students. To ensure their privacy, the students are coded here instead of writing their original names. Student A has said that group work helped the group members in developing their interpersonal skills such as speaking and listening, as well as team building skills. Student B took it a little further and has said that they came to know each other more and, also helped each other by sharing ideas and opinions. Student C has combined her past and present experience to sum up the positive effects of this study on the students. She had noticed that in every team, there was always someone who tried to dominate the whole team work, but she felt that in this study, every single participant was given an equal opportunity to speak and take part in the work. She had said that it helped in making everyone feel that he is an important member of the group.

Kagan (1999) also says that Positive interdependence drives cooperation, and if there is cooperation in a group, the members will feel like selecting a leader, because they want to unite well as a team to reach goals of the group. The opinion of student D also justifies his argument. The student has said that there was an equal participation from the students, and no one was marginalized or avoided. He had felt a group leader was needed for the group to manage the team well, and the team should select one.

Also, 93.8 % of the students have said that being able to participate alongside others has helped them establish positive relations with people from different ethnic backgrounds, culture, social class, gender, and ability groups. 75% of the students had also agreed that they experienced a low level of anxiety and stress when doing tasks that involve equal participation from every member. This outcome clearly speaks about the need for cultural



positive interdependence in a group work. Also, 94.8 % of students supported the view that mutual dependence in a group helped in building the sense of trust, and responsibility among the group members. As we know, today's professional world demands team work from its employees, and hence, students always tend to develop their abilities as per the needs and demands of the commercial world. To support the same, 87.5 % of the students have felt that by participating in these tasks, they are now on the right tract to deal with team work when they enter the professional world.

Conclusion

So from this study, three major conclusions can be drawn. First, as most of the students seek support from each other, they have welcomed the idea of positive interdependence. They have felt that they can have long term benefits in their professional and social lives by taking part in such tasks. Next, they have felt that a teacher should take more active roles in forming the groups so that no group should be either too strong or too weak. There should be an equal mix of students with various levels of abilities so that no group feels demotivated. Finally, they had also found it very interesting when materials related to their culture were introduced in the classroom. Additionally, they took some pride in presenting their culture to other group members.

Because this study is supported by some able above mentioned evidence, I strongly believe that it has a lot of scope for developing the process of second language learning. If it is realized that positive interdependence is an asset in a classroom, a lot of students would be benefitted with its use, because they would get support from their peers in understanding complicated things. Also, if the culture of the learners is brought in the classrooms, they may connect with such materials very quickly when compared to materials that are quite unknown to them. It may also the increase the number of self-confident and highly motivated students in a classroom. Furthermore, it would not be a big surprise if the number of dropouts from schools and colleges get reduced with the use of positive interdependence in classrooms.



For further research, I believe that this study has a lot of breadth. My study has focused on Positive Interdependence and materials based on culture together, but individual studies could be carried out that could mainly focus on either of the above mentioned variables. Also, out of the five elements of Collaborative Learning that I had mentioned in the beginning of the study, I chose only one, but other elements like Individual Accountability, Face-To-Face Promotive Interaction, Social Skills and Group Processing may also be tried together to get better results. Since many of the students in this study emphasised on the role of a teacher in Collaborative Learning, various other studies based on the Beliefs and Attitudes of the teachers could be carried out, and this may have some positive implications on some of the Teacher Training Programs that are being carried out across the country to build future teachers.

Finally, I would like to conclude by stressing on the fact that we truly live in an advanced world where technology is helping in the rapid transfer of the valuable information from one culture to another. Almost no culture remained untouched because of this so far, and it is constantly trying to modify itself to meet the professional demands of this globe. Therefore, this modification is also needed in the process of second language learning so that no culture remains alien to the learners, and also they should not be strangers to their own culture. There should be an equal mix of both to keep the students motivated, and my study has tried to balance this in its own capacity with the help of positive interdependence. Though its results are context specific, there is no reason why such an outcome cannot be obtained in any other place to reap the unlimited benefits of "Cultural Positive Interdependence" in a multicultural second language classroom which is quite prevalent these days.

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