

Collaborative Language Learning and Teaching

Edited by

David Nunan



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1992

First published 1992
Reprinted 1993

Library of Congress catalogue card number: 91-35573

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 0 521 41687 6 hardback
ISBN 0 521 42701 0 paperback

Transferred to digital printing 2003

Copyright

The law allows a reader to make a single copy of part of a book for purposes of private study. It does not allow the copying of entire books or the making of multiple copies of extracts. Written permission for any such copying must always be obtained from the publisher in advance.

WD

Contents

Acknowledgements	vii
Contributors	viii
Introduction	1
Part I Focus on learning	11
1 Experiential language learning: second language learning as cooperative learner education <i>Viljo Kohonen</i>	14
2 Literacy skills or literate skills? Considerations for ESL/EFL learners <i>Shirley Brice Heath</i>	40
3 Collaboration: constructing shared understandings in a second language classroom <i>Donald Freeman</i>	56
4 Context and cooperation in academic tasks <i>Bernard Mohan and Sondra Marshall Smith</i>	81
5 Collaborative writing as a literacy event: implications for ESL instruction <i>Denise E. Murray</i>	100
Part II Focus on teaching	118
6 Collaborative language teaching: a co-investigation <i>Nora B. Shannon and Bonnie Meath-Lang</i>	120
7 Team teaching: a case study from Japan <i>Peter Sturman</i>	141
8 Some reflections on collaborative language teaching <i>Kathleen M. Bailey, Ted Dale and Benjamin Squire</i>	162

Contents

9	The power of observation: ‘Make a wish, make a dream, imagine all the possibilities!’ <i>Jerry G. Gebhard and Akiko Ueda-Motonaga</i>	179
10	A teacher-research group in action <i>Sandra R. Schecter and Rafael Ramirez</i>	192
11	Putting a process syllabus into practice <i>Roger Budd and Tony Wright</i>	208
12	Toward a collaborative approach to curriculum development: a case study <i>David Nunan</i>	230

References	255
Index	268

Introduction

David Nunan

The purpose of this introductory chapter is to provide a context for the collection as a whole, as well as to situate collaborative language learning, teaching and research within the sphere of second and foreign language education. While drawing on traditions reaching back to the turn of the century, collaborative teaching and learning have emerged over the last ten years as significant concepts within the field of language education. In doing so, they bring together a number of disparate philosophical perspectives and research traditions. These include humanistic education, experiential learning, systemic-functional linguistics, and psycholinguistically motivated classroom-oriented research. In the rest of this chapter, I shall briefly outline the theoretical and empirical bases which provide a rationale for collaborative teaching and learning. In the first part, I shall examine the effect of collaboration on the learning process, pointing out links between contributions to the volume and related work on psychology and education. In the second section, links will be drawn between the chapters in this book which deal primarily with teaching, and relevant research in the educational literature. The chapter concludes with a series of key questions relating to collaborative research, learning and teaching, along with an indication of where the reader might look for answers.

In language education, teachers, learners, researchers and curriculum specialists can collaborate for a number of reasons. They may wish to experiment with alternative ways of organising teaching and learning; they may be concerned with promoting a philosophy of cooperation rather than competition; they may wish to create an environment in which learners, teachers and researchers are teaching and learning from each other in an equitable way (a trend which is enhanced by the growing interest in action research); or they may wish to experiment with ways of incorporating principles of learner-centredness into their programs. All of these motives are reflected in one way or another in the chapters in this collection, each of which deals with some aspect of collaborative learning, teaching, research, teacher education or curriculum development in second and foreign language education.

The chapters are grouped into two principal sections. The first of these focusses on the learner, while the second focusses on the teacher. I have

Introduction

organised the collection in this way as much for convenience as anything else, and readers will note that in most chapters discussion is not confined solely to the principal point of focus. Thus contributions to the section on learning must of necessity deal with teaching, and indeed with research, while chapters in the section on teaching deal also with learning and research. All contributions contain implications for teacher education and curriculum development.

The learning process

Humanistic psychology has had an influence on language education in a number of respects. It provides a rationale for several of the more prominent methods such as Community Language Learning, the Silent Way and Suggestopedia (although it could be argued that as they are practised, some of these methods are anything but humane!). It has also influenced curriculum theorising, particularly learner-oriented approaches to curriculum development. The influence of humanism on experiential learning is also traced by Kohonen in this collection who argues (see page 14) that: 'In experiential learning, immediate personal experience is seen as the focal point for learning, giving "life, texture, and subjective personal meaning to abstract concepts and at the same time providing a concrete, publicly shared reference point for testing the implications and validity of ideas created during the learning process" (Kolb 1984: 21).'

In empirical investigations of the subjective meaning brought by learners to the learning process, researchers have found that learners are different and learn in different ways (Willing 1988). It has been argued that these differences should be reflected at the level of methodology in the selection of learning experiences. At each stage in the curriculum process, be it planning, implementation or evaluation, information about learners (and, where feasible, from learners) will be used to guide the selection of content, learning experiences and the means of assessing outcomes.

[A learner-centred] curriculum will contain similar elements to those contained in traditional curriculum development, that is, planning (including needs analysis, goal and objective setting), implementation (including methodology and materials development) and evaluation (see, for example, Hunkins 1980). However, the key difference between learner-centred and traditional curriculum development is that, in the former, the curriculum is a collaborative effort between teachers and learners, since learners are closely involved in the decision-making process regarding the content of the curriculum and how it is taught.

This change in orientation has major practical implications for the entire curriculum process, since a negotiated curriculum cannot be introduced and managed in the same way as one which is prescribed by the teacher or teaching institutions. In particular, it places the burden for all aspects of curriculum development on the teacher.

(Nunan 1988: 2)

In this collection, the chapter by Budd and Wright provides a case study of what happens when a group of learners are involved collaboratively in programme planning and implementation. Nunan describes a large-scale curriculum renewal project involving the collaborative efforts of teachers, learners and curriculum specialists. Despite the problems and difficulties involved it was found that collaboration encouraged learners:

- to learn about learning, to learn better and
- to increase their awareness about language, and about self, and hence about learning;
- to develop, as a result, metacommunicative as well as communicative skills;
- to confront, and come to terms with, the conflicts between individual needs and group needs, both in social, procedural terms as well as linguistic, content terms;
- to realise that content and method are inextricably linked, and
- to recognise the decision-making tasks themselves as genuine communicative activities.

In practical terms, collaborative learning entails students working together to achieve common learning goals (see Slavin 1983; Sharan *et al.* 1984). It stands in contrast with competitive learning. (Although, of course, collaboration and competition can coexist in the same classroom; for example, when learners work collaboratively with some learners in a small group, but competitively against other learners in other groups.) Recent empirical work in literacy instruction has supported the theoretically motivated arguments in favour of cooperative learning. In two investigations into the efficacy of cooperative approaches to reading and writing instruction in third- and fourth-grade classrooms, as opposed to traditional instruction, Stevens, Madden, Slavin and Farnish (1987) found that students working in cooperative groups significantly outperformed those receiving traditional instruction on standardised measures of reading comprehension, reading vocabulary, language mechanics, language expression and spelling. They also performed better on writing sample and oral reading measures (see also Stevens, Slavin and Farnish 1991). In foreign language instruction, Bejarano (1987) assessed the effects of two small-group cooperative

Introduction

techniques and a whole-class method on the academic achievement of 665 seventh-grade pupils. It was found that students in both small-group methods significantly outperformed students in the whole-class method. The researcher concludes from the investigation that the findings 'support the link between the communicative approach to foreign language instruction and cooperative learning in small groups. The study demonstrates how to forge a link between the content and the process of instruction' (Bejarano 1987: 483).

Cooperative learning is also supported by recent research inspired by process-oriented models of second language acquisition. This research has focussed on the question: what patterns of classroom organisation and types of classroom tasks are most beneficial for language acquisition? It has been argued that those tasks in which learners are required to negotiate meaning among themselves in the course of completing an interactive task are particularly suited to language development (for a review of this research, see Larsen-Freeman and Long 1991; Long 1981; Nunan 1989a).

The need to augment this research agenda with studies informed by a social view of language development forms the point of departure for the study by Mohan and Smith in this volume. Their research complements recent work by Bassano and Christison (1988), among others, who see the development of cooperative learning techniques in ESL classrooms as an important element in successful classroom management. Bassano and Christison point out that there are at least three areas in which cooperative learning can figure. These are: '(1) classroom environment and social tasks; (2) process tasks such as peer tutoring and goal setting; and (3) progress monitoring and evaluative tasks.' They make several practical suggestions for increasing the amount of cooperative learning in each of these areas. In their view, classroom environment and social tasks are perhaps the areas which lend themselves most readily to cooperation. They suggest that learners can take partial or full responsibility for the following: arranging classroom furniture before class; keeping attendance records; decorating bulletin boards and the classroom; carrying out classroom maintenance, setting up equipment for films; handing out and replacing materials; collecting money for coffee-break supplies; generating advice on disciplinary matters; making announcements and signalling when breaks are over; welcoming and greeting new students and introducing them to class routines. Students can also be involved in curriculum work such as the selection of tasks, goal setting, and materials development. Monitoring and evaluation is the last area where learners can be encouraged to collaborate through tasks such as self-assessment and progress monitoring charts.

The research on collaborative as opposed to competitive learning has generally been positive. According to Good and Brophy (1987) 41 studies are reported in the literature. Of these, 26 found significantly greater learning in classes using cooperative methods, 14 were not significant, and only one found significantly greater learning in a control group. It would seem from the studies that it is the reward structure rather than the task structure which accounts for these findings. Good and Brophy go on to suggest that:

There is no evidence that group competition offers advantages over other cooperative learning methods so long as arrangements are made to provide specific group rewards based on the cumulative performance of individual group members. . . . although the effects of cooperative learning on achievement appear to be basically motivational, the key is not motivation to win competitions against other teams but motivation to assist one's teammates to meet their individual goals and thus insure that the team as a whole will do well.

(Good and Brophy 1987: 437-8)

The theoretical, empirical and practical advantages of cooperative learning have been aptly summarised by Slavin in the following manner:

. . . the research done up to the present has shown enough positive effects of cooperative learning, on a variety of outcomes, to force us to re-examine traditional instructional practices. We can no longer ignore the potential power of the peer group, perhaps the one remaining free resource for improving schools. We can no longer see the class as 30 or more individuals whose only instructionally useful interactions are with the teacher, where peer interactions are unstructured or off-task. On the other hand, at least for achievement, we now know that simply allowing students to work together is unlikely to capture the power of the peer group to motivate students to perform.

(Slavin 1983: 128)

The teaching process

Although collaborative and team approaches to teaching have been around for many years, there is comparatively little literature on the subject. Most of what one hears remains anecdotal. Some years ago, in a large-scale investigation of the curriculum practices of some 800 teachers (reported in Nunan 1988), teachers nominated team teaching as a highly favoured option in their professional practice. However, when

Introduction

it came to documenting the collaborative practices of the teachers, very few of them had anything to report. In a major review of team teaching and academic achievement, Armstrong (1977), lists the following five strengths of collaborative teaching approaches to pedagogy (see also W. L. Rutherford 1975):

1. Team teaching permits team members to take advantage of individual teacher strengths in planning for instruction and in working with learners.
2. Team teaching spurs creativity because teachers know they must teach for their colleagues as well as for their learners.
3. Team teaching facilitates individualized instruction because it is possible to provide learning environments involving close personal contact between teacher and learner.
4. Team teaching provides for better sequencing and pacing of increments of instruction because perceptions of an individual teacher must be verified by at least one other team member.
5. Team teaching builds program continuity over time. Team teaching programs abide. Specific teachers within a team do not.

(Armstrong 1977: 60)

There have been numerous studies carried out to evaluate the effectiveness of collaborative teaching, and the results make interesting reading. In primary/elementary classrooms, reading and language skills were significantly enhanced by team teaching in four out of six instances. Ten studies reported no significant differences. In secondary classrooms, five studies reported significant differences for collaborative approaches. There are no reported instances of single-teacher instruction resulting in significantly better test scores. In general, then, the studies favour collaborative classrooms, although, like most empirical research, the implications are not particularly clear-cut, and some of the outcomes are open to question. Most of the studies are small-scale and conducted over a limited period of time. In addition, the criterion measure is generally success on a standardised achievement measure. Not all teachers would agree that such scores should be the only or even the most important measure of educational success. (For a review of this and other research, see Armstrong 1977; Good and Brophy 1987.)

The most important implication of this research is that for collaborative teaching to be effective, teachers need appropriate training and support. It is insufficient simply to throw teachers together without giving them opportunities for developing the skills they need for success. They also need adequate time to plan their programs as well as opportunities to review their teaching. There is sufficient evidence, both in the existing literature and in the studies in this volume to suggest that, as a

pedagogical innovation, collaborative teaching can only hope to succeed if:

- teachers possess or are given skills appropriate to the innovation;
- teachers are given time to implement the innovation;
- appropriate administrative and managerial arrangements and mechanisms are developed in tandem with the pedagogical innovation.

An important characteristic of this volume is that all of the chapters apart from Kohonen's, are data based. Further, the research has resulted from projects which have been conjointly carried out by teachers and learners as well as researchers. As such, they provide a model and an exemplification of the philosophy pervading the collection. Of particular note is the involvement of the practitioner in research. Such collaboration can help bridge the gap between theory and practice, and increases the likelihood that research outcomes will actually find some sort of realisation in the classroom itself (Kemmis and McTaggart 1987; Nunan 1989b). In calling for a greater role for teachers Beasley and Riordan observe that:

. . . the gulf between research bodies and the teaching profession has ensured that many research programmes are not related to professional concerns and interests of teachers and students. Priorities for research too often reflect the interests of academic researchers or central office administrators not school people. Teachers and students in the classroom are rarely actively engaged in the research. Within the experimental framework the researcher protects his or her independence for the sake of 'objectivity'. The tacit knowledge of teachers is devalued. Many of the findings are recorded in a form and style which is accessible to the trained researcher but fails to communicate to teachers, school administrators, parents or advisory people. The primary audience for research has been the research community not the practising teacher. Not surprisingly, we the practising teachers have come to distrust and reject theoretical research and the researcher who takes but does not give.

(Beasley and Riordan 1981: 60)

Insofar as they stimulate teachers to observe and reflect on their professional practice, the sorts of collaborative engagements by teachers with learners, colleagues, researchers and curriculum developers described in this volume represent a valuable form of professional development. It also reflects a philosophical shift as we move 'from a period of "teacher training," characterised by approaches which view teacher preparation as familiarising student teachers with techniques and skills to apply in the classroom, to "teacher education," charac-

Introduction

terised by approaches that involve teachers in developing theories of teaching, understanding the nature of teacher decision making, and strategies for critical self-awareness and self-evaluation' (Richards and Nunan 1990). This view of professional development as a matter of developing internal rather than external criteria for judging the worth of what we do as teachers entails different roles for the teacher educator and for teacher education. The collaborative rather than directive nature of teacher education is captured by Freeman (1989):

Through development, the collaborator works to trigger the teacher's awareness of what the latter is doing. By asking questions, by making observations in a detached way, by sharing personal teaching experience, the collaborator endeavors to start the teacher on a process of reflection, critique, and refinement of the teacher's classroom practice . . . development is a far less predictable or directed strategy than training. It is highly dependent on the individual teacher, the collaborator and their interaction. Because the collaborator's role is to trigger change through the teacher's awareness, rather than to intervene directly as in training, the changes that result from development cannot be foreseen or expected within a designated time period.

(Freeman 1989: 40–1)

Discussion

In this Introduction, I have provided a rationale for collaborative learning and teaching. I have described the philosophical and ideological antecedents to the movement, as well as sketching out some of the more significant research outcomes to be found in the educational and language teaching literature. The main aim of the Introduction is to provide signposts for what is to come, and the various themes and issues canvassed here are taken up and elaborated in the chapters which follow. I should like to conclude by indicating the central questions and issues which emerge in the course of the book.

In relation to research

- What are the central characteristics of a collaborative approach to classroom research, and in what ways do the different contributions of teachers, learners and researchers provide us with insights which would be difficult to obtain in any other way? (The issue of the differential contributions of teacher, learner and researcher are central to the chapters by Heath, Freeman, Mohan and Smith, Budd and Wright, and Nunan.)

- What are appropriate theoretical models of language and learning for informing collaborative research? (Not surprisingly, linguistic models, such as that provided by Halliday (1985), which incorporate a social dimension or which integrate social and psychological approaches to language and learning are favoured by the authors in the collection. Such models are referred to explicitly by Kohonen, Heath, Freeman, Mohan and Smith, and Murray. Kohonen, Heath, and Freeman also point out the complex interplay between the social/interpersonal and cognitive/intrapersonal dimensions of language learning and use.)
- What are appropriate research methods, tools and techniques for collaborative investigations? (All of the contributions to the collection provide rich descriptive and interpretive accounts of language learning and teaching. The range of research techniques reported include participant observation, lesson transcripts and protocols (written records of learner language), ethnographic narratives, case studies, diaries and journals, questionnaires and interviews.)

In relation to learning

- What classroom tasks and patterns of organisation facilitate cooperative learning? (Numerous practical suggestions and ideas are outlined by Kohonen, Heath, Mohan and Smith, and Murray.)
- In what way is context an important element in language learning? (Contextualised learning, teaching and research underlies most of the contributions to this book, and is dealt with at some length by Heath, Mohan and Smith, and Murray.)

In relation to teaching

- What are the advantages and disadvantages of team teaching? (For case studies of team teaching, see Shannon and Meath-Lang, Sturman, and Bailey, Dale and Squire.)
- What organisational patterns underlie successful collaborative teaching? (This question is dealt with by Shannon and Meath-Lang, and Bailey, Dale and Squire.)
- How can the notion of the extended professional be realised through a collaborative approach to teacher education? (The use of action research (i.e. the process of teachers identifying problems, formulating these as research questions, collecting relevant data, and interpreting and acting on them) is described by Kohonen, Schecter and Ramirez, and Nunan. Gebhard and Ueda-Motonaga argue for a collaborative approach to teacher supervision.)

Conclusion

From the studies in this collection, the following conclusions emerge:

1. Cooperative learning provides a viable, and in many contexts, a more effective alternative to the competitive ethic which dominates much educational thinking today.
2. Learning, teaching and research can be enhanced by an extension and redefinition of the role relationships of learners, teachers and researchers. In particular, teachers can be researchers and learners can embrace the roles of researcher and teacher.
3. Team teaching is a difficult, but not impossible, mode of organising teaching and learning, even in cultural contexts where such modes are largely unknown, and the benefits for teachers and learners far outweigh the extra effort involved.
4. In order to understand and appreciate the complexities of the language classroom, it is important to study processes of teaching and learning where they actually occur, that is, in the classroom itself.
5. Teachers, learners, researchers and teacher educators all have different voices. It is important for modes of teaching, learning, and research to evolve in which all of these voices can be heard.

In this chapter, I have made numerous references to teaching and research in content classrooms. By making reference to collaborative research in classrooms where subjects other than language are taught, I hope that I have situated language learning within the broader context of the educational mainstream. There is a great deal of theory, research and practice within this mainstream which speaks directly to the concerns of the language teacher, researcher, curriculum developer and teacher educator and it is vitally important that this work guide and inform what happens in the language classroom.