



Fostering Cognitive Collaboration for Effective Instruction in English Language Classrooms in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

One of the greatest challenges for English language teachers in Nigerian secondary schools is how to prepare students to meet the competitive demands of life in the 21st century. On one hand, the student has to acquire the skills of interpreting and using information in a speed-driven world of communication. On the other hand, the teacher is faced with poor infrastructure and lack of materials which make it difficult for the teaching – learning process. Faced with the persistent reality of falling standards of education, the situation demands that there be a paradigm shift in the teaching and learning strategies of the English language. In Nigeria as in many other countries, proficiency in English is a major determinant of success across the curriculum and in the world of work. The paper posits that this seemingly impossible task can be overcome by fostering cognitive collaboration in collaborative learning groups when teaching the skills of English language. This will motivate students towards successful learning and achievement in literacy and English. It will also allow teachers to pool their own expertise and develop co-teaching strategies that will derive further benefits for their English language learners.

Key words: *cognitive collaboration, collaborative/ cooperative learning, co-teaching strategies*

INTRODUCTION

It is an undeniable fact that more young people and their parents have become aware that a university education and a profession are the keys to a successful career and enviable lifestyle. The sheer numbers of students-1,736,571 in 2017 (Joint Admission Matriculation Board) - who sat for the entrance examinations to Nigerian universities bear this out. Preparation for university education starts in earnest at the secondary school. It is in the secondary school, attitudes are shaped and learning strategies are acquired for future academic and career success. Given this scenario it is therefore

imperative that teachers at this level be aware of what must be done in order to make academic activities worthwhile.

Public schools in Nigeria both at the primary and secondary levels are grossly underfunded and are therefore ill- equipped for modern teaching and learning. Another contributory factor to the poor standard of education in Nigeria is inappropriate methodology as it relates to learners' interest and needs (Oyinloye & Gbenedo, 2010). With this dismal state of affairs when will our Nigerian students ever attain the level of achievement to compete with their

The digital world in which we live plays a major contributing role in the ways in which information is acquired, shared and applied. In fact, its ability to change lives and situations in a short time is one of the features that are attributed to the speed at which information travels. These changes are not only occurring in the social world but also greatly affect what goes on in the world of academics where knowledge is becoming more specialized. Today, our students are expected to replace the basic skills with new competencies of transferring knowledge to solve problems and think and act creatively towards innovations that are for the most part technology driven. The acquisition of skills in collaboration, cooperation, critical thinking and creativity has become the definition of an individual's being able to thrive in the global economy.

What does this mean for education at the secondary level? In the area of teaching English language which is the focus of this paper, it means that the teacher must seek and provide new opportunities for students to acquire greater proficiency in the language skill which involves making decision and sharing information when they prepare to turn in assignments. One of these strategies that English Language teachers need to provide for their students particularly at the senior level of secondary school is to assist students to work towards cognitive collaboration through cooperative learning.

The major aim of this paper therefore is to provide teachers with information on how to foster cognitive collaboration in their English language classrooms. This will not only optimize learning opportunities for their students but also lay a solid foundation towards their performance at the tertiary level and the outside world.

What is Cognitive Collaboration?

In a broad sense cognitive collaboration means the coming together of individuals in groups to enhance their understanding or knowledge about a

given issue. Langer (2000) explains further that “in cognitive collaborations, students work in communicative groups and teachers help students participate in thoughtful dialogue” (p.14). In other words, the expectations are that students would bring their skills and knowledge within the context of a purposeful activity (Langer, 2000. p.4). Cognitive collaboration is reflective of Vygotsky’s (1978) theory of social proximity which explains that cognitive development is best realised when learners interact with others in their own environment and in cooperation with their peers. A major feature of cognitive collaboration therefore is the existence of collaborative or cooperative groups where the interaction takes place.

Benefits of Collaborative/ Cooperative Learning in Fostering Cognitive Collaboration

Langer (2000) explains that in the communicative groups of collaborative learning:

Students engage in the kind of teamwork that is highly prized in business and industry. They bring their personal, cultural and academic knowledge to these interactions in which they play the multiple role of learners, teachers and inquirers and have opportunities to consider issues from multiple perspectives (p.14).

Eskay, Onwu, Obiyo and Obidoa (2010) have also identified the following benefits of collaborative learning:

1. It creates a positive interdependence among students achieving their goals. They recognize their own success depends on the success of other students.
2. It allows students to develop life-long skills of self-confidence, responsibility, growth of organizational skills, decision making, experimenting, exploring, expressing feelings, empathizing and motivation.
3. It prevents negative feelings of always having to be the learner and feelings of superiority of always being the teacher (p.34).

Other researchers for example, Lord (2001) noted that the students see themselves as active participants in the process; Wenzel (2000) noted that students in mixed groups understand the material better and remember more than in homogenous groups. Slavin (1991) found that 61% of the students in the cooperative learning class performed better than those in the traditional class. Williamson and Rove (2002) noted that students in the cooperative learning classes asked more questions than those in the

traditional class. Obinna-Akakuru, Onah and Opara (2015) in a study in Imo State, Nigeria noted that students who were involved in cooperative learning performed significantly better in English Language tests than those who did not. Chukwuyenum, Nwankwo and Tooche (2014) also noted that cooperative learning had a positively significant effect on the English Language scores of students in Delta State, Nigeria. These results concurred with those of Sittler (1994), Moryadee (2001) and Sectape (2003) and Montaz (2010) who also recorded better achievement of cooperative learning groups in English Language tests in Reading and Comprehension.

These studies buttress the fact that that the connection between collaborative/cooperative learning groups and higher cognitive development is a result of cognitive collaboration. Langer (2000) explains further:

Teachers expect students not merely to work together but also to sharpen their understandings with, against, and from one another...whole class activities particularly discussions, foster similar cognitive collaborations. Teachers understand the importance of treating students as members of dynamic communities that rely on social and cognitive interactions to support learning (p.14).

Collaborative Teaching

Harris (2002) has observed that changing the mind-set of teachers who use the traditional methods might be a difficult task. However, teaching is a dynamic enterprise and English language teaching is constantly evolving due to research and technology. A result-oriented teacher must practise reflective thinking and research into new teaching methods towards gaining mastery in teaching the subject. 21st Century learning and innovation skills (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2014) have included the 4C's of Collaboration, Communication, Creative thinking and Creativity as being key to success in today's world. The acquisition of these skills is obtained through cooperative learning in groups. If students are taught to work in groups to acquire these skills, then it makes sense if the teachers themselves can see the wisdom in collaborative teaching (co-teaching) as part of the best practices in creating a learning environment to support 21st century skills. The additional skills acquired in co-teaching can also be seen as an aspect of the teacher's efforts to remain relevant and competitive and can be extended as an aspect of lifelong learning.

The type of co-teaching that this paper advocates is best suggested by Villa, Thousand, and Nevin, (2008) who state that co-teaching involves sharing responsibilities for planning instruction and evaluation for students. The professional relationship between partners must feature trust and the ability to communicate, share chores and participate at all levels in a constructive manner. The focus on planning together is critical to being part of a team and may demand a restructure (to some extent) of the time table. Given the fact that the class only lasts for a fixed period of time, teachers may only come together for those classes that need co-teaching. This could involve one teacher giving instruction and both going around the groups to interact with students or the choice of another model (See Table below)

Our students in Nigeria are learning English as Second Language (ESL) learners. Honigsfield and Dove (2010) have identified and set out what the essential components of an integral collaborative ESL Programme should look like in the table below;

Table 1: Components of an Integral ESL Programme

Instructional Activities	
Joint planning	ESL and mainstream teachers participate in grade-level, team or department meetings and are involved in the planning process.
Curriculum mapping and alignment	Four types of information are included in curriculum mapping and alignment: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The content (essential knowledge taught) • The processes and skills used to teach the content • The assessment tools • Key resources used resulting in instruction in the content classes becoming more meaning for ELLs.
Parallel teaching	Since ESL services are often provided in the form of a free-standing, pull-out program, ESL and mainstream teachers should coordinate the objectives of their lessons.

Co-developing instructional materials	ESL and mainstream teachers collaborate in not only creating lesson or unit plans, but also in developing instructional materials, resources, activity sheets, in-class and homework assignments, and assessment tools, with ELLs' needs in mind.
Collaborative assessment of student work	ESL and mainstream teachers collaboratively focus on each ELL's strengths and weaknesses and identify appropriate strategies to respond to patterns of learning problems.
Co-teaching as a Framework for	Key factors that are necessary to address the unique academic, cultural, and linguistic characteristics and needs of ELLs in an ESL co-teaching
Sustained Teacher Collaboration	context are: shared philosophy of teaching; collaborative practice; cross-cultural and interpersonal skills; bridging and building content knowledge; consistent and support teacher behaviours; and linguistic adaptations.

Source: Honigsfield and Dove (2010)

The above integrations according to Honigsfield and Dove (2010) can be identified in the following models.

Co-Teaching Models

Honigsfield and Dove (2010) have suggested different models of co-teaching as follows:

- Model 1:** One Group- One Lead Teacher and One "Teaching on Purpose" focused on mini lesson for students.
- Model 2:** One Group - Two teachers teach same content. Teacher presents a lesson, teacher gives examples.
- Model 3:** One Group- One Teaches, one assesses.
- Model 4:** Two Groups Two Teachers teach same Content.
- Model 5:** Two Groups- One Teacher Pre-teaches; one teacher teaches alternative information.
- Model 6:** Two Groups- One Teachers Re-teaches, one teacher teaches alternative information.
- Model 7:** Multiple groups- Two Teachers monitor and teach.

Group Dynamics

If cognitive collaboration is to take place then the group dynamics, which support collaborative or cooperative learning must be right. Teachers must take time to assemble groups strategically in order to maximize the interactions. Students must listen and interact with each other, challenge each other's responses, and create new ones where necessary.

These pre-instructional decisions concerning the group formation would even be more advantageous if the teacher knows the personalities and the academic performance of the students beforehand. Kunsch, Jitendra and Sood (2007) noted that peer tutoring works when students of different ability levels work together. According to Clifford (2012), a group size of three or less may not allow enough divergent thinking but more than 4-5 would be too much. Slavin (1980) however maintained that two or more students working together learn more than individual students. Cohen (1998) explained that teachers must ensure that all students must participate in the group discussions. Teachers must also ensure that the group activities must not be taken over by one or two more dominant personalities.

A group meeting must be held to establish group goals, group norms- deviance will not be tolerated- create roles for larger tasks, build trust and open communication. Members of the group must be reminded that no one knows everything and that no one has all the answers. In this regard, group members need to encourage one another and stay on task. When giving and accepting feedback from other members it should be done with utmost courtesy. Sometimes the groups have a leader with members filling in supportive roles. At other times depending on the task every member has a specific role and must report back to the group.

The leadership skills of the teacher in managing groups can be found in the wisdom of rotating groups for different tasks. This gives the members of a class the opportunity to experience different classmates for new interactions. The classroom environment is different. Students sit in circles as students discuss and argue to get their own points across. In many of such classrooms there may be more than one teacher who will be moving around to assist the students.

Teaching English Language

Alton-Lee (2003) has stated that one of the models for effective teaching is that pedagogical practices should create caring, inclusive and cohesive

learning communities. A teacher therefore in working with this model must strive to investigate which practices and other innovations can be employed to produce results that are worth the effort put into the lessons. In this regard, the teacher must not only have the academic knowledge of what to do, there must also be a measure of creativity in order to make the classes interesting.

Teaching English Language involves teaching four skills namely listening, speaking, reading and writing. A major reason for success in fostering cognitive collaboration as a strategy is that in all of the lessons an underlying integrative approach is at work.

True, the major objectives may highlight a particular skill for example, narrative writing or reading comprehension but ultimately the group work would use all of the skills to varying degrees to achieve their desired goals. The following are some helpful points in teaching the skills in English Language;

1. Teachers should decide on their own model of collaboration (co-teaching). This gives them the time to plan ahead. Collaborative Learning takes significant planning and preparation.
2. Teachers must begin the collaborative or cooperative learning groups early in the semester so that group work becomes natural to the students. Once the order is given to move into groups, the class should know what to do and move easily and calmly from one place to the next.
3. Before the task is given in , teachers must ensure that the background knowledge is put in place and separate activities within targeted units of reading, writing, oral language are given for practice. Separate activities provide ways for teachers to mark a skill for future use (Langer, 2000). In working on reading comprehension assignments students must have ideas how to go about pre reading, during reading and after reading strategies, for example.
4. Difficult tasks should be broken into segments. Teachers must guide students and give them the right strategies not only to complete the tasks but also enough time to assimilate the processes. Instructions for tasks must be clear and unambiguous.
5. The emphasis on language instruction is not only to pass a test but to give students the opportunities to be literate for life.
6. An example, fostering cognitive collaboration in **teaching writing** could take a number of stages. A teacher could take the class in general discussing the task carefully. Small group work could brainstorm, sharing ideas for the writing. As individuals the

members of the group could begin to write but at the stage of editing, the group could come together once again discussing, asking for classification and challenging each other's writing efforts towards improvement. Individuals could then return to their own writing, making improvements before turning in their work. The sharing, explanations and corrections would allow the students to have a clearer understanding of the process due to cognitive collaboration.

7. **Writing assignments** can be given on topics that ensure students do some level of collaborative research before they write.
8. **Reading comprehension** classes can become very lively discussions particularly for questions at the inferential and critical levels. These are also natural content areas for creating links to life and social situations of the day. Texts can be exploited from different points of view and could become scaffolds to more integrated activities e.g. topics for **debates**, essays and creative writing.
9. Teachers must remember the value of literary works in enhancing English Language proficiency. This is particularly helpful in working with our Nigerian students who are English as Second Language (ESL) learners.
10. Teachers must be creative enough to move away from routine assignments to encourage comments and questions that will cause deeper and more generative **discussions** and analysis.
- 11.

Conclusion

Fostering cognitive collaboration among students can be used as an important teaching strategy to develop 21st Century Skills and is best learned in collaborative or cooperative learning groups. This paper also highlighted the fact that this new strategy is reflective of a changing world from information to collaboration and how teachers teach and assess learning must also change. It is important for teachers to learn about the latest developments in the field and to get some practical ideas that can help them further develop their teaching skills, optimize their students' learning and renew their practices.

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