Dixie Dixit

More than Group Work: Collaborative Communication

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Most language teachers understand the value of having their students work with their peers. Pair work and small group work allow for a more efficient use of class time. In a fifty-minute class, if students are working individually, we will be lucky if each student manages to speak one minute. By having students work in pairs, speaking time increases exponentially.

Some of the tasks that we have students carry out in pairs or small groups are practicing dialogs, either from their course book or self-produced dialogs, information gap activities, problem-solving activities, small discussions, etc. These activities provide useful guided or freer practice for students. This is especially true for beginners and for learning new structures.

In this column, however, I would like to talk about tasks that lead to collaborative communication, and how, in turn, collaborative communication leads to deeper learning. Collaborative communication, as defined by Craig (2010), can be understood as "…a set of practices that professionals implement in their specific disciplinary contexts in response to specific writing or presentation criteria" (p. 148). In other words, it is not specific to classroom communication. Rather, it is the type of teamwork carried out in professional settings. This kind of work can be set up in a classroom. I know of two examples of successful collaborative communication: one among elementary school children in a public school in Mexico City and the other example from a private university in another Mexican city.

This first example is described by Guzmán and Rojas-Drummond (2012), and although the students worked in their native language of Spanish, the results are still pertinent for this case. The study took place among fourth, fifth, and sixth graders in two different public schools in Mexico City. The task was the same for both groups; only the setup varied. The task was to write an article for the school magazine. Students received input in the form of three different readings about a topic (animals in danger of extinction, for example). Based on the information they received, students wrote their own articles on the topic. In one school, the students worked individually. In the second school, they worked in triads.

The articles from both groups were analyzed and graded on organization, identification of main ideas, synthesis, cohesion, use of sequence markers, concordance, spelling, and punctuation. The articles written by the triads were significantly superior to those written by the individuals in every category except spelling. Guzmán and Rojas-Drummond (2012) explain these results by saying that collaborative communication offers the opportunity to practice constructive communication, and leads to the production of richer texts, with greater cohesion and coherence, more creative ideas, and linguistic variety.

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The second example comes from my own work (Santana, 2013). Based on the context of a private university, 19 students from the School of Accounting were taking a course in Business English. As part of the course, they were asked to participate as speakers in an international business conference. The task consisted of working in teams to select a topic, research it, write up the paper, and send it to the conference organizers. The students were divided into three teams of six or seven members each. One team selected the topic of taxes, another chose the importance of creativity training for accounting students, and the third team selected the topic of local dependence on remittances from the United States. The students worked with mentor teachers for help with the content. The three papers were accepted for the conference, which took place in Hawaii. I have repeated this type of activity with students in the subsequent years, and their papers have always been accepted for the conference.

Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) explain that it is not so much the writing, but rather the *process* of writing, which leads to more meaningful learning. This process includes setting a goal, planning, solving the problems which come about, looking for information, evaluating the pertinence of that information, analyzing, and synthesizing. To accomplish all of these, students need to get input, process it, clarify their ideas, present them to their teammates, and negotiate. It is all of these activities which lead to improvement in language.

How hard is it to implement collaborative communication in the classroom? It will probably be difficult for beginner students. However, pre-intermediate students already have enough language to be able to start with appropriate tasks. Guzmán and Rojas-Drummond's (2012) study shows that it works well with children as young as fourth graders. Older students should have no difficulty with the tasks. In terms of time, for my own task, I had only a total 32 class hours in the semester; I used six 30-minute sessions to set up the task, show the students where to look for information, check progress, give feedback, and present final projects.

Interdisciplinary work may be another option to gain time. Students can work on writing reports on topics they have seen in other classes, even if the input is not in English. If writing is too time-consuming for your class, students can work on joint oral presentations. The important thing is that they work to decide what they are going to say, and how they will say it. Remember, it is the *process* that matters, more than the product.

I believe that pair or group work is an efficient use of class time, but I have seen that tasks that involve students in producing a written document or presentation lead to greater learning. I hope you can try this out for yourself. It requires a little extra effort perhaps, in looking for appropriate tasks and in setting them up, but the benefits for the students certainly outweigh the difficulties. If the outcome is improved learning for the students, setting up collaborative communication activities in class is definitely worthwhile.

References

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