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COLLABORATIVE TEACHING – A BRIDGE BUILDING TOWARDS STUDENTS' SOCIAL AND ACADEMIC BENEFITS

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Abstract: *This article is the result of an analysis based on a 14-year observation of the academic and social evolution of students in different educational institutions, contexts and levels of English and French language study in both Canada and Romania. Collaboration has proven to be an effective concept necessary to be introduced in the curriculum. The focus of this project will be on some groups of students studying English and French within different science faculties within a university in Romania. Learning crises are identified as students feel reluctant to both attend and participate in these classes. Moreover, the low number of classes in the curriculum discourages students even more. There is also an overall lack of motivation resulting in the instructor's conclusion that a linguistic context is badly needed both inside and outside of the class. Along with their progress during their language practice, students' motivation will be enhanced if students are involved in extra-curricular activities. Coupled with a few innovative learning strategies, the craft of teaching and social contexts presented by some native speaker guests expert on topics appealing to the students could promote greater interest in the study of these two languages.*

Keywords: EFL, collaborative, teaching, motivation

1. Introduction

Teaching methods are not to be used at random. The instructor must choose which practices and strategies are suitable to the particular needs of the students. Many studies refer to collaborative teaching methods as having as main participants graduate students, teachers, or instructors. Keith Sawyer notes other researchers' beliefs when comparing novice teachers with experienced ones, which "can modify [their repertoire of teaching practices] to improvisation ally respond to each classroom's unique needs [3]".

In Ali Mansouri Nejad's study, "collaborative practice" in EFL grammar context is "doubtful" in terms of effectiveness [1]. In this project, the problems identified during EFL classes at a university require the integration of some collaborative practices for further reasons. The instructor's pedagogical process becomes similar to how parents educate their children. There is no clear way to educate except for some main guiding principles. Parents need to feel, figure out and empathize with their children's needs. Co-teaching could also be an effective teaching method but only if the two teachers share similar perspectives. They must construct a concise teaching plan with clear objectives.

2. The Review of the Literature

There is a multitude of research papers on the topic of collaboration, which is a very effective approach no matter the people among which it is created. Based on recent research, collaboration could happen among students, between students and teachers and

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especially among instructor, students, and guests invited and involved in a project built according to the student's interests and needs.

2.1. Collaborative Work among Students

Over the last century, researchers all over the world have promoted collaborative work among students as they found that learner-centered approaches ensure constructiveness in their learning process. Furthermore, classrooms in some educational institutions such as Concordia University or McGill University in Canada have been transformed into active learning environments. It became common knowledge that such circumstances lessen students' anxiety, heightening intrinsic motivation to engage in discussions on different topics. The effectiveness of interaction among students during classes has been promoted to the extent that their collaboration was also used during assessment. The study by Helen Bremhert and her colleagues found such research experiments on collaboration as "a great tool for any science teacher to use in their classroom to promote student learning in all activities they require of students "[5]. Sumangala Rao and her colleagues also conclude that cooperative learning may result in "higher academic achievement, more positive relationships among students, more positive psychological well-being, and a more constructive classroom environment" [6]. Mariah Doren describes the benefits of collaboration among students as they "may gain a deeper understanding of the way their minds work, find a commitment to building strong communities, understand dispositions toward learning, and exercise higher-order thinking skills" [7].

2.2. Collaborative Work between/ among Instructors

Boyle and Kaiser's study shows the benefits of collaboration between experts. They could both notice issues that arose during the process of planning, teaching, learning and even assessment "collaboration around task design can make this goal a reality and furnishes an enriching experience for both teachers and students" [8]. In such situations, instructors "need to share their preferences, strengths, and weaknesses" [9]. Instructors should become aware that co-teaching is not an easy process to plan and perform. It might require "training in collaboration, co-teaching, and differentiation of instruction […] and that instructors "need to communicate as best they can" [10].

3. The Study

Among many other scholars, Keith Sawyer notes that, "teaching has been thought of as a creative performance" [2] and that "creative teaching suggests a very different vision–teachers are knowledgeable and expert professionals and are granted creative autonomy to improvise in their classrooms […] result[ing] in brighter, more motivated, and more effective teachers, and […] in students with deeper understanding and improved creative and social skills" [4].

Being aware that taking over some groups of students, reluctant about my discipline, prompted me to find new approaches that I could come up with, even if they had not been included in the curriculum.

Anglophone and Francophone experts in the fields the students were studying had been approached to create a plan that could involve students in conversations. Statements such as, "Why would we need to know things about other cultures? Do they know anything about our country?" helped me understand their lack of motivation.

Students studying Culture and Civilization in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Culture and Civilization in the United States of America had a chance to attend the activity entitled American Culture and Civilization in the Military presented by an American instructor also specialized in geopolitics.

On the other hand, students registered for French classes were attending the course Culture and Civilization in France. They participated in the following extracurricular activities: The Francophony - a Bridge towards New Cultural Horizons delivered by a Swiss teacher belonging to the Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie (AUF), The Defense Policy in France – delivered by a French military expert; Culture and Civilization in Quebec delivered by a Canadian francophone and military expert. The aims were lessening students' anxiety, heightening intrinsic motivation, increasing the encouragement of students, and developing their skills to engage in discussions on different topics. The instructors also tried to make sure in the presentation students could hear some answers to questions they had asked such as "Why would we need to know things about other cultures? Do they know anything about our country?"

3.1. Broadening the Learning Environment by Collaborative Teaching

From a pedagogical point of view, the ideal experience a teacher can have is observing students all through their growing stages within a particular geographical area or a particular social context. For several decades, teachers in Montreal public schools, colleges, and universities have been striving and focusing on education. Collaborating among themselves, with students and with other experts, all teaching approaches they use are constructive no matter the subject.

Apart from the schools where the Baccalaureate International program is integrated, in Europe, such as France, Italy, England, Romania constructiveness is not the main focus. Despite teachers' and instructors' efforts to implement interactive approaches during their classes, the overall results are most often not satisfying. Furthermore, the active learning environments existing in some institutions are not naturally used because the perspective associated with their usefulness has not been assimilated. Most teachers do not feel ready yet to implement it during their classes.

Romanian students, in particular, are still used to memorizing information. Referring to some prestigious universities of Sibiu such as Lucian Blaga University and "Nicolae Balcescu" Land Forces Academy, students distinguish themselves by remarkable intellectual feats. Noticing such values, pedagogical concerns arise as instructors feel responsible to encourage their evolution by bringing into their academic planning the best approaches, material and resources. A particular situation to be noticed is students from more faculties of sciences studying English and French as foreign languages. They show they had not studied within interactive environments.

Some learning crisis is identified as students feel reluctant to both attend and participate in the English and French classes. Their serious concern is the upcoming low results they expect. The low number of classes established in the curriculum discourages them even more as they realize that their linguistic skills cannot be improved within a short while no matter the efforts. The pedagogical diagnosis is definitely lack of motivation.

Being realistic, the instructor concludes that a linguistic context is badly needed in-class and outside the class. In order to convince students that their language skills were not as bad as they thought, some native guests were invited to talk to them and with them on topics that the instructor considered of interest to the students during an-hour extracurricular activities. The context of the collaborative activity proved to definitively contribute to changing the perception of the students on the cultural contexts being discussed.

Conclusion

These students are invited to participate in a research article in the Students' Conference organized annually by the institution where

they study. To do so, not only are they required to be at a certain linguistic level, but are also expected to demonstrate the capacity to write a research paper on a topic related to their language course. These activities were meant to introduce students to the francophone and anglophone cultural backgrounds. This will offer them the opportunity to reflect on topics of interest to research and present at the conference next year.

Based on the instructors' empathy and professional experience, together with the craft of designing the curriculum and the process of teaching itself, the collaboration with native anglophone and francophone speakers on interesting topics has also been proven to be key to students' successful results.

During their language practice, motivation has been increased and the feedback from the students expressed their appreciation for an opportunity to broaden their minds concerning language study. Coupled with some learning strategies, social contexts could bring back the pleasure and interest in the study of these two languages. The instructor's monitoring of the students' struggles during their learning process allowed her to intervene in order to better their socio-academic evolution. (Figure 1)

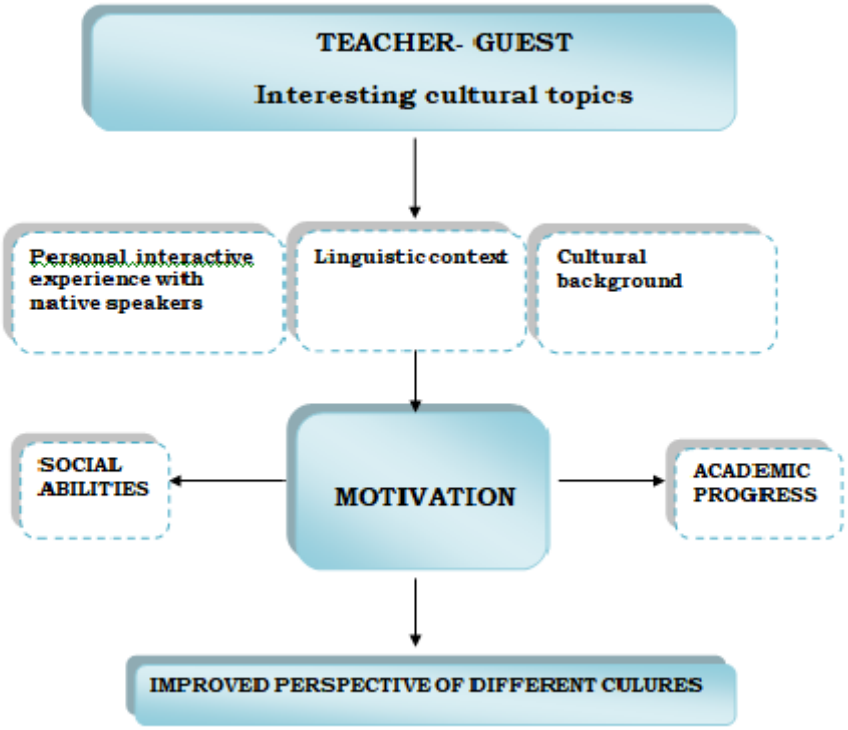


Figure 1

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