

## A Case Study on Collaborative Learning in Promoting Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) among English as a Second Language (ESL) Learners

Zuraina Ali<sup>1</sup>

### ABSTRACT

*This qualitative study explores how collaborative learning experience promotes higher thinking skills among four students in Universiti Malaysia Pahang. Three research questions are posted in the study and these are: How do learners of ESL take responsibility after thinking critically over an issue in collaborative learning? How is it possible for ESL learners in admitting their initial opinion to be incorrect or partially flawed in collaborative learning environment? And what are the strategies that learners of ESL use in working collaboratively after thinking critically over an issue? Several themes are discussed in relation to the research questions stated.*

**Keywords:** Collaborative learning, higher thinking skills, ESL learners

### INTRODUCTION

Collaborative Learning, Cooperative Learning and Problem-Based Learning are among the approaches in learning. These series of learning differ from one another in accordance to their methods, devices, styles and others. In language learning, teachers in the classroom adopt one of the methods or may combine these methods to enliven the teaching-learning processes. In my eight years experiences of teaching in Universiti Malaysia Pahang (UMP), I observe that collaborative learning displays positive impact in the way I teach English; though the other two also play significant roles in the class. Observing students arguing, commenting and refuting views made by their course mates, to me is “worth” of an effort in letting them to making “noise” in the class. Suresh (1999), states that this interactive partnering enables realistic social contexts to be formed. Moreover, maintaining such an environment would help sustain the student's interests and would provide a more natural learning habitat (Suresh, 1999).

In UMP, collaborative learning experiences of students in English class can best be observed when students work in group rather than in pairs. Gokhale (1995), comments that maintaining a small size of group members can make students at various performance levels work together to reach a common goal. The small group size in collaborative learning is given credit in a study conducted by Chang (2008), where students work in group of three for Online Expert Group as well as in Online Project Group.

The opportunity learning in collaborative learning can also give rooms for students to think critically since ideas can be evaluated by all members in the group. Students become critical thinkers since they take responsibility for their own learning when discussions are conducted in the class (Gokhale, 1995 in Totten, Sills, Digby, & Russ, 1991). Relating to the statement with the situation in English class, it is observed that students do not seriously play their roles; putting effort to think critically of the subject matter being discussed. More importantly they are not interested to display higher level thinking skills wherein they need to find solutions to a problem, discover the pros and cons of the issue at hands and finally make reasonable conclusions (Chang & Yang, 2009). Consequently, this leads to dry discussion.

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<sup>1</sup> Zuraina Ali is a lecturer at Department of Modern Languages, Centre for Modern Languages & Human Sciences, Universiti Malaysia Pahang, Kuantan Pahang. E-mail: zuraina@ump.edu.my.

### ***Statement of the Problem***

In a typical English as A Second Language (ESL) class, individual or group presentation is carried out for students to present ideas and thoughts after they summarise materials they read. As such in speaking activity (or presentation) specifically, the benefits of understanding the content of the text is to the students who present the ideas only-they communicate ideas after summarising the content of the text. Students who listen to the content on the other hand, seldom benefit from it due to the activity is merely reviewing the texts.

Moreover, should there be any question after the presentation; it does not illustrate the higher level of thinking abilities. Questions or comments receive by audiences or other students in the class do not show that they use their critical thinking skills particularly analysis, synthesis and evaluation to ask for the presenter's feedback.

The collaborative learning where "the expansion of critical thinking through discussion, clarification of ideas, and evaluation of others' ideas, encouraging the practice of higher level cognitive thinking skills" (Totten, Digby, & Russ, 1991, p.2) do not co-exist with the content that students deliver in the class, although the issue that they are discussing is thought provoking. Therefore, there is a need to "understand why individual students do what they do (Ary, Jacobs & Razavieh, 2006, p. 440)" in this regard.

### ***Research Questions***

The study attempts to answer the following research questions in relation to the use of high level thinking skills (in Bloom Taxonomy) in collaborative learning experiences among ESL learners in UMP:

1. How do learners of ESL take responsibility after thinking critically over an issue in collaborative learning?
2. How is it possible for ESL learners in admitting their initial opinion to be incorrect or partially flawed in collaborative learning environment?
3. What are the strategies that learners of ESL use in working collaboratively after thinking critically over an issue?

## **REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

This section discusses two main issues in understanding the topic of the study. These are collaborative learning and critical thinking skills. It is viewed that these are the 'essence' of the study since I intend to study these two elements respectively.

### ***Collaborative Learning***

Collaborative learning is the umbrella term where 'a joint-venture' of teaching-learning experience is depicted in class. In this environment, students and teachers benefit from the discussion in searching for mutual understanding, solution or meanings, or creating a product (Smith & MacGregor, 1992). Examples of implementations of collaborative learning use in classes can be seen in the writing group, peer teaching and problem-structured instruction to name a few (Smith & MacGregor, 1992). The approach also allows students learning the language in a discussion group to "guess meaning from their background knowledge and letting-it-out though they might encounter occasional mistakes compared to having no attempt in discussing the topic at hand" (Arnold, 1999, p.15).

### ***Owning the Learning in Collaborative Learning***

Yacizi (2005), states in collaborative learning, teachers should encourage students to make informed choices since they portray the traits of independent learners and willing to accept responsibilities for their own learning (p. 226). Volery & Lord (2000), support the argument by saying that teachers' roles are crucial in effective collaborative