

DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL AWARENESS THROUGH THE JIGSAW METHOD

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Abstract: Teachers have always been preoccupied with finding new ways to enhance learning and to motivate their students. Nowadays, teaching is learner-centered which means that students are required to take responsibility for their own learning, are encouraged to participate in the teaching process and to work collaboratively.

The advantage of cooperative learning methods of teaching is that they meet all these requirements and create opportunities for students to be accountable for their learning and to develop team work skills. The requirements of today's society and work environment should be put into practice by the education establishments and help students become better citizens and professionals. One way to achieve this is by the implementation of cooperative learning methods which offers learners the opportunity to take more responsibility for effective learning in both working individually and in groups.

The present article describes the jigsaw method and offers an example of using this technique in the language classroom for developing intercultural awareness skills through reading. It offers an alternative to classical reading activities, which may be less involving. The positive aspect of this kind of task is that it helps all the students participate in the work and it offers them the opportunity to correct each other and debate on the topic of discussion. Many skills are developed and practised by these techniques such as: presentation skills, team work, language practice and communication skills, intercultural skills.

Thus, intercultural awareness activities become fun and by encouraging students to discover by themselves cultural elements, these tasks are a good method to promote understanding of ethnorelativism.

Keywords: collaborative, learning, jigsaw, reading, intercultural

Theoretical background: cooperative learning

The teaching field has always been challenging for teachers because it requires to work with people and to address difference in innovative ways so that learners may achieve competences at a similar level. Reflective teachers may have confronted with a series of questions such as:

- How can I better motivate my students?
- What should I do to get all the students involved in the lesson, despite their personality differences?
- How can I grab and maintain my students' interest?
- How do I address different learning styles?

The questions may continue and the answers can be different according to teacher's expertise, personality, love for his/her job, degree of involvement, creativity, professional knowledge etc. Still, one answer which may prove to be satisfactory for all these questions refers to collaborative learning techniques.

If teachers implement collaborative learning methods they address the issues of diversity in the classroom, which means that every learner, irrespective of their learning styles and personality traits may benefit from these techniques. By working in groups to achieve a common goal, students become better motivated and cooperation is ensured if they work effectively. Teacher's role is not

to lecture and transmit knowledge but to facilitate learning and encourage participation and cooperation.

Traditional teaching with the teacher at the centre of the classroom promotes passive learning, which doesn't involve the student as an active participant in his/her own learning. The more recent teaching methods focus more on students' active participation in the teaching-learning process and on the creation of meaningful learning contexts for them. We believe that students learn best when they are invited to participate, collaborate and take responsibility for their own learning. One way to achieve this goal is through cooperative learning. This strategy teaching and learning strategy allows students to create their own learning through exploring and exchanging information. Besides increased knowledge of a given subject students develop other soft skills such as: team work, communication skills and positive social behavior (politely disagreeing, asking questions, active listening). In a study (Tombak et al 2010) the authors demonstrates that the implementation of cooperative learning methods at university level has positive effects on students' motivation.

The jigsaw method can also be used to develop research skills in working with data by requiring students to gather and analyze data sets generated by different disciplinary research methods and then synthesize understanding across multiple types of data sets (qualitative and quantitative; ecological and sociological data collected at different spatial and temporal scales, etc.).

Not all group work becomes cooperative learning. Students may be grouped to perform a task but inappropriate behavior may appear which impedes effective cooperative learning. Some of the students may not contribute to the common task while others may take control of the activity and work individually without asking for collaboration. Cooperative learning appears when students work together to accomplish shared learning goals. In order to work together effectively and learn from peers students must assume responsibility for their own learning and for sharing information. The learning goals are established by the teacher and students understand that their individual work counts as part of a whole.

According to Johnson and Johnson, and Johnson and Holubec (1991, 2005) cooperative learning is conditioned by five elements: positive interdependence, individual accountability, promotive face- to-face interaction, interpersonal skills and group processing.

Positive interdependence is the first and the most important element of effective cooperative learning. Positive interdependence occurs when students understand that the success of the group depends on each member's effort put into work. They perceive that they are linked with each other with an invisible bond so that when every member succeeds, group success is ensured. On the contrary, if one fails, the rest also fail. This concerted effort creates a great sense of belonging and increases self-esteem. All the work that one does is not only beneficial for himself/herself but it benefits all the other group members as well. This interdependence is based on one person's commitment to become part of a whole and to contribute to other people's success as well as one's own.

Individual accountability refers to the commitment to accomplish one's individual tasks which contributes his/her part of the work to the group's general goal. The group's goal must be measurable in terms of progress and individual effort. This avoids the undesirable situation in which one member does a lower quality work than others. Individual performance must be assessed by the teacher or an observer and the feedback provided is presented to the individual and the group in order to decide who needs more guidance in accomplishing the task. The feedback is given to help students become better at their work by peer/teacher correction and support and not to blame one member who may be weaker at performing the given task.

The third element of cooperative learning is face-to-face interaction which should take the form of helping, supporting, encouraging and praising each other's efforts. In effective interaction for cooperative learning, students care for the other's understanding of the task, enjoy sharing their knowledge with the others and promote constructive discussions about the ideas and notions involved in the learning. Face to face interaction encourages verbal and non-verbal communication, exchange of ideas and common understanding of the task.

Cooperative learning requires interpersonal skills for everyone to function as part of a group. As opposed to individual learning cooperative learning involves teamwork which occurs simultaneously. In a team students may play different roles such as: leader, negotiator, mediator, motivator etc. That is why, they must have or develop social skills like: conflict-management, leadership, decision-making, trust-building or active listening skills. Teachers who decide to teach through cooperative learning methods must know themselves how to teach these social skills in order to make a group learning work.

The last component of cooperative learning is group processing. This refers to making the group work by achieving the group's goals while maintaining effective work relationships. For this, the group members must monitor and discuss about what worked well and what didn't, analyze what individual work was helpful/unhelpful, ask for clarification, agree and disagree politely. These actions contribute to the improvement of teamwork and the process of learning.

Cooperative learning is beneficial in the classroom because it helps students become good listeners, more tolerant, assertive and cooperative. According to Meyers and Thomas quoted by Muza Maftai (2011) it teaches them how to offer and receive constructive feedback to respect differences of opinions, to support their judgments with evidence.

In the language classroom cooperative learning methods are very useful, since they not only create a friendly environment for discovering information related to a given subject but also encourage communication and group work. Nowadays the teaching methods have changed; the more student-centered activities are used in the classroom, the better. Learners are involved into the process of learning and they are encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning. This way they can become aware of their own learning progress and better assess their skills.

The Jigsaw method. An example for the language classroom

In this context of cooperative learning teacher's role is very complex; from forming heterogeneous groups and scheduling the time for tasks to creating concrete tasks for students' work and ensuring the five basic elements of effective cooperative learning are implemented. Without this guidance, simply setting a group task and seating people together does not necessarily lead to cooperative learning. In a group, some members may not contribute equally and responsibly considering that the others will perform the task, while others may take control of the entire group work without sharing any information or asking for collaboration.

Ioan Cerghit (2006) considers that the phenomenon of social laziness which occurs when one considers that his/her contribution to the group task cannot be precisely set is annihilated by the jigsaw method. This method, created by Elliot Aronson in the early 1970s, promotes cooperative learning and ensures that all students contribute their work. Just like in a jigsaw puzzle the group members' work is essential for the understanding of the final product.

The Jigsaw method has some advantages:

- it develops critical and creative thinking skills
- it creates group cohesion and develops teamwork skills
- it increases self-esteem

- it promotes a sense of belonging
- it develops argumentative communication skills
- it promotes more self-control over one's own learning
- it encourages peer-to-peer teaching and learning accountability
- it combines team and individual learning
- it develops problem-solving skills

The Jigsaw scenario involves five stages:

- setting the topic/unit/task to be learned
- forming the heterogeneous learning teams (called home groups)
- experts' activity
- returning to the home groups
- assessment

The first stage, that of setting the topic/task/unit to be learned, represents teacher's input. The teacher introduces the general topic and divides it into 4-5 subtopics.

The next stage refers to forming the teams by random techniques. For example, the teachers may give students number cards. Four or five students may stay at the same table, each of them having a different number. Students with number one from all the teams will deal with topic 1/solve task 1, a.s.o. Each team receives one expert sheet of paper and the 4-5 subtopics. Each student in home groups works individually on his/her subtopic/task. In the next step all students with number 1 gather in a separate team of experts. The same applies for those with the other numbers. The experts work collaboratively to solve their task and to debate their subtopic. At this stage they report on their findings which they gathered during their independent work. Based on these findings they will decide what information should be added and what is relevant for their topic. They help each other understand their subtopic and prepare their teaching part.

The fourth stage is the return to the home/learning team where each expert will teach about the subtopic/task he/she has now expertise in. The members of the home group are encouraged to participate in discussions, to ask questions, express viewpoints and take notes.

The final stage is the assessment phase when the experts in each team present before the class their findings in a logical manner. During this time the teacher may intervene to ask questions, to conclude, add points, or to test students' knowledge from all the participants pieces by a quiz. The teacher must ensure that all the stages are followed and that all students are involved.

Dr. Barbara Tewksbury offers the following description of the jigsaw method :“Teams of students are assigned to investigate different aspects of t he same problem or issue. Each team, might, for example, analyze a different but related data set or read an article on different aspects or viewpoints on the same topic. Once each team member thoroughly understands his/her team's aspect of the problem, new groups are formed, with at least one representative from each original team. Each individual then explains his/her team's aspect of the problem to the new group. In this way, every student learns every aspect of the problem. Each group then uses the combined information to evaluate a summary issue” (1995, p. 322).

Language learning is defined first and foremost by social interaction. It is about “interactions that take place between the learner and the teacher, between learners, between the learner and the environment, and between the learner and the wider society” (Zhu et al 2007,p.2). Nowadays teaching about culture and intercultural awareness has become an intrinsic part of language teaching and learning. Intercultural skills are achieved through awareness and acceptance of cultural differences, adaptability to diversity and tolerance of new situations and through

movement from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism. These skills are paramount in intercultural encounters which may take place both in the host country or abroad.

One way to teach intercultural awareness is through comparing cultural knowledge in order to understand differences and accept cultural relativism. Reading texts may prove to be less involving in a language classroom than using the same texts in a cooperative learning game. Students become more motivated to read their part and participate in group discussions.

The Jigsaw method may be used to learn new grammar context but also to develop intercultural awareness through reading.

In order to implement the Jigsaw method for intercultural awareness we asked the students to join home groups (1,2,3,4) The expert files which consisted of two reading texts about two different cultures (The USA and India) were given to all the students. Also, the teacher provided the students with four subtopics (4 questions to be answered according to the texts: Local Culture, Clothing and Language, Etiquette and Customs, Business Meeting Advice). The four questions to be answered by the students are the same for both texts:

1. How is the local culture organized? What are its characteristics?
2. What is the dress code?
3. Mention various customs in different social contexts (dining etiquette, hands shaking, punctuality etc)
4. Offer business advice on introductions, greetings, relationships, negotiations, etc

Each student in the home groups is asked to work individually and solve the task given by the teacher (that is to answer their question based on the two cultural texts and compare the information found).

Each student with number 1 up to number 4 joins expert groups and members of these expert groups discuss the answers to their question. I have noticed that during this stage some students add points which others have left out. They constructively discuss about the differences between the two cultures. The next step involves returning to the home groups and presenting their answers to each question. Students now practice presentation skills and very attentive to the language used. The teacher encourages group members to ask questions and add comments. The purpose of these discussions is to understand that cultural differences should be accepted and that there is no standard when we talk about cultures.

The jigsaw method used to teach and discover intercultural elements in a language classroom is motivating and engaging. Still, in order to proactively equip teams to manage differences and avoid unproductive behavior and conflict, it is important to establish norms and rules for group interactions. A useful strategy is for students to co - develop guidelines for group discussions such as everyone has the right to speak, speaking shall be done in turns, silence is allowed. Moreover, students can negotiate a team contract that delineates how team members will keep each other accountable and what consequences will follow should someone fail to complete their contribution on time. Also, using self and peer evaluations to document individual contributions can help to identify dysfunctional group dynamics. In exceptional situations, the instructor may choose to facilitate a team discussion to resolve difficult group dynamics.

Conclusions

Teaching about intercultural awareness is not an easy task. The teacher cannot simply tell students that they have to accept that punctuality does not mean the same thing all over the world or that gift giving may take various forms. A person who is not exposed to other cultures and who has not had any experience with intercultural encounters may not understand the idea of difference and ethnorelative attitude. The general tendency for a person who has not been in contact with other

cultures is to be ethnocentric and to judge the other cultures by their own norms. One student told me once that being 30 minutes late for a social event (as the Mexicans do) is rude so, unwillingly he considers Mexicans rude. This overgeneralization comes from the fact that some students do not have the intercultural understanding which should accompany learning a foreign language.

With this increased mobility taking place in all fields of activity nowadays, students must be prepared not only linguistically but also culturally for multicultural interactions and openness.

Learning about intercultural aspects is sometimes received with reluctance and prudence. Due to learners' ethnocentric attitudes which are present at the beginning of any language-culture course they do not accept cultural differences from the start. Intercultural knowledge about cultural differences on various topics is available on the internet but less known and discovered. Students nowadays are inquisitive, demanding and don't take everything for granted. The language teachers have to make an effort to find methods to attract their language learners towards cultural and intercultural elements through interactive teaching and learning techniques.

The Jigsaw method used for comparing cultural texts to develop intercultural awareness proves to be motivating and increases students' participation in the work and their self-discovery of cultural elements. This self-guided work along with its collaborative part makes students develop multiple skills, among which social skills which are very important for their future professions.

The Jigsaw method is appropriate for all age levels and it can be adapted to many subject matters and topics. More importantly, in the language teaching field the technique is a motivating factor for practicing speaking and learning new content.

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