RESEARCH ARTICLE

TEACHER-STUDENT PERSPECTIVES AND EXPERIENCES WITH THE USE OF COOPERATIVE LEARNING IN POETRY CLASSROOM SETTINGS

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ABSTRACT

Cooperative learning has been proclaimed as an effective instructional approach in promoting language development in learners. However, its use in Kenyan schools is relatively uncommon. This seemingly is because many teachers are not prepared to implement cooperative learning principles in the classroom. This article reports the views of a group of teachers and students regarding the effectiveness of using of cooperative learning as a strategy to improve pupils' ability to understand and interpret high school poetry. Form three students (N-199) in six secondary schools in Baringo district participated in the study. Six teachers of same sex taught the poetry content in the classes using either of the two approaches, namely 1) Cooperative learning and 2) the Conventional method. Selected students and teachers were interviewed and their views summarized. The qualitative data analysis methods of comparison were used. The results of the study indicate significant improvements in students' understanding of and attitudes towards poetry. The learners saw Cooperative learning as helping them not only to develop appropriate responses to the given poems but also enabled them to enjoy poetry in general. The teachers' version also indicates the potential of Cooperative learning in enhancing the learning of poetry. For instance the study revealed that apart from its positive influence on the students' classroom interaction patterns, those in the cooperative learning groups learned poetry interpretation skills better than their counterparts in the conventional classrooms. The experience influenced the teachers' belief about using group work to enhance poetry lessons.

INTRODUCTION

The classroom is a unique social, educational, and communicative environment. A classroom is not just a mere aggregate of pupils. Rather, a classroom as a group is unique and has characteristics and properties that go beyond the individual students who comprise the class (Hertz-Lazarowitz, 1995)). One essential component that is seen to facilitate the teaching-learning process is the nature of the classroom environment in which learning takes place. According to Ramogo and Kiboss (1997) an effective classroom environment is one in which the teaching-learning process varies according to such factors as the role of the teacher, the role of the learner, and the nature of the instructional processes. It is obvious to any teacher that effective teaching depends on the degree to which the teacher is able to create an environment in which students are motivated to learn for themselves (Short, Lewin and Mc Cann, 1991). A review of the literature shows that there are two major factors that may influence the teacher and the learner roles in classroom milieu. These are the nature of the learning activities and the nature of classroom environment. But the nature of learning activities is primarily dependent on

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both the individual learners' contribution and participation in the teaching learning process (Susman, 1998; Kiboss, 2000). Thus, knowledge and understanding as well as the socio-cultural and psychological aspects brought by the teacher and / or the learner into the classroom are considerably important. In any classroom also, there are three types of interactions that are of significance to every teacher. These interactions, in which learning in the classroom is dependent on, are: i) interactions between the individual learners themselves, ii) interactions between the learners and the teacher, and iii) interactions between the learners and instructional material. The amount and quality of interaction mainly in a student centered environment plays a key role in the learning process as well as having a significant impact on the learning outcomes (Susman, 1998). Contemporary theories of language, for instance, stress the importance of student centered learning where much learning is done through peer to peer interaction (Abdulla and Jacobs, 2004). One delivery method that supports various types of interaction is Cooperative Learning. Cooperative learning was first introduced in the 1970s and is used frequently in K - 12 classrooms abroad but has yet to gain prominence in Kenyan classrooms. One goal of Cooperative Learning is to ensure that group work is directional and successful.

Johnson and Johnson (1989) assert that a key component in effective collaboration is social interdependence where

individuals share common goals and each individual's outcomes are affected by the actions of others. This means that the more students feel comfortable and care about each other, the greater will be their commitment to the success of the group.

In the past few years, research in language education has shown that students' appreciation of poetry is negatively affected by the way teachers approach it. Most of the instructional methods that language teachers employ in poetry classrooms are usually teacher-centered and hence give students fewer or no roles in the classroom discourse (Chemwei and Nyandusi, 2008). As such, the teacher dominates classroom talks and questions while the learners sit and listen (Kiboss, 2000). Situations such as these tend to not only limit the learners' active participation but follow the bullet theory that take learners as having empty heads that need knowledge to be poured into by the teacher. There have been calls by educators and researchers for the adoption of constructivist approaches to teaching and learning that suggest that learners be actively involved in the learning process. But many teachers seem unprepared to use them. As a result, the teacher oriented teaching prevalent in most of our classrooms have continued to compel students to play passive roles. Nevertheless, effective teaching depends on the degree to which the teacher is able to create a learning environment in which learners are motivated to learn for themselves. This is considered so because a motivated student and a positive classroom atmosphere are a powerful combination that greatly enhances the teaching and learning process (Short, Lewin, and McCann, 1991). The manner in which the language classroom is organized is quite important if students' interest in learning is to be sustained. This study sought to evaluate the perceptions of form three students and their teachers towards cooperative learning.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

It is largely agreed that Cooperative learning, when properly implemented, brings about learning environments that can meet the current needs of large classrooms. For instance, when compared to competitive and individualistic practices, cooperation leads to higher group and individual achievement, higher quality reasoning and strategies, more frequent transfer of these from the group to individual members, more cognition and more new ideas and solutions to problems (Kimengi, Mugalavai, and Obando, 2008). But in spite of the recent break away from traditional practices to group approaches that emphasize peer interaction in the context of cooperative goals, very little is known about the perspectives and experiences held by students and teachers regarding the effectiveness or otherwise of Cooperative learning groupings. This study is an attempt to contribute in this regard. The study was therefore set to determine:

1- Students' perceptions and experiences in the classroom imposed on them and with which they interact.
2- The similarities and differences regarding students' perceptions of their teachers' role during the instructional process.

3- Students' and teachers' perceptions about the effectiveness or otherwise of Cooperative learning programme on students' appreciation of poetry.
4- Students' perceptions about the effectiveness of Cooperative learning in influencing students and interest in poetry.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study was a qualitative study that sought to find out the perceptions and experiences of students and teachers about cooperative learning. The quasi-experimental design with a pre-test-post-test control group was employed in this study. Groups were formed using a random assignment of subjects to the experimental and control group. The study adopted the quasi-experimental approach because the study was carried out in pubic schools with classes already constituted and was not possible to reorganize them in order to employ individual randomization procedures. Nonetheless, the design is rigorous and robust enough in eliminating variations that might arise because of experiences that might contaminate the validity of the study (Borg, 1987). The experimental group was exposed to the cooperative learning program while the control group was denied the program. The teachers taught the same peltry content to both groups except for the methods (Cooperative learning and the regular methods). A total of 199 form three students from six secondary schools in Baringo district of Rift valley province in Kenya served as the subjects of the study.

INSTRUMENTS

The participating teachers and a group of students were interviewed using the teacher interview guide (TIG) and the student interview guide (SIG) respectively. The TIG and the SIG each contained seven semi-structured questions that were intended to get the views of the teachers and students regarding their teaching and learning experiences respectively with CL during the poetry lessons. Both the students and teachers were interviewed individually to get their perceptions and reactions to the use of CL in teaching poetry.

The participating students and teachers were interviewed using the Student Interview Guide (SIG) and the Teacher Interview Guide (TIG). The questions queried the participating teachers and students regarding their views or perspectives on what actually happened during the classroom instruction and also their views about the effectiveness of the Cooperative Learning program on the teaching and learning of Poetry.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Teachers' Experience with Cooperative Learning in the Poetry Classroom

The teachers who participated in this study were interviewed to get their views about their teaching of poetry through the teacher oriented or regular method and the Cooperative learning approach. From their comments, there is a general consensus that students using CL exhibited a better appreciation of poetry than their counterparts using the regular methods. For instance, an interview which asked the teachers

to share their feelings about the teaching poetry in CL classrooms revealed the following:

Researcher: What was your experience of having to teach poetry to your form three's using the cooperative learning approach?

Teacher 1: Initially, my experience of having to teach poetry using CL generated a lot of anxiety in me because I didn't know how my students would react to it, considering the fact that I was dealing with a class where most students are conservative and have negative attitude towards poetry (Teacher interview, experimental group, Mixed school).

Teacher 2: It was assuring and optimistic because this was an opportunity for me to make my students realize the crucial need to work in groups and as a team (Teacher interview, experimental group, Boys school).

Teacher 3: It gave my students a chance to go about dramatising, analyzing and interpreting the poems without my being the only person to do it (Teacher interview, experimental group, Girls' school).

The anecdotes illustrated in the excerpt above echo varied teachers' views about teaching poetry in CL groups. Their views portray the use of CL to be an opportunity for their students to interact and learn poetry from one another.

The Teachers' Paradigm Shift as a Result of Using Cooperative learning in the Poetry Classroom

The perspectives given by the teachers were used to provide interpretations of events and the impact of CL on students learning. As such the teachers were interviewed to get the overall view of the classroom environment. Essentially, the teacher plays a critical role in teaching poetry using CL groups. This is exemplified by the following excerpt which shows teachers responses on what role they play while teaching poetry using this learning strategy.

Researcher: What do you feel to be your role while teaching poetry?

Teacher 1: It is that of a facilitator….guiding students on what they should do in their cooperative groups (Teacher interview, Experimental group, mixed school).

Teacher 2: My role is one of a guide and evaluator. I come in to to shed light where students fail to get the aspects of a given poem (Teacher Interview, experimental group, Girls school).

Teacher 3: Guiding students to learn. After presenting the poem to the learners, I give them questions. I then read the poem aloud and explain the vocabulary and what each line means then guide them to reach the answer (Teacher interview, Boys school, control group).

Teacher 4: Explaining and discussing with them. This is because my students can never work on their own (Teacher interview, Girls school, control group).

An examination of the anecdotes above shows the teachers' views and role in both the experimental and control groups. It is clear from these perspectives that in CL groups, the role of the teacher has changed from that of a source of knowledge to that of a facilitator and an evaluator of learning. But in the control groups, the teachers view their role to be that of a provider of content information. This means that she is the centre of learning in the groups.

Students' experiences with cooperative learning in the classroom

Several interviews with students indicated that poetry lessons learnt in CL enhanced students' learning while those taught by the teacher in conventional settings were very difficult and inaccessible. The following excerpts confirm this:

Researcher: Do you think working in cooperative groups helped you improve your knowledge of poetry?

Marion: Yeah! The lessons were quite interesting and I learnt a lot from my fellow students and also from the teacher. Hardly was it difficult for us to handle poetry questions in CL groups. We helped each other, corrected each other's responses and discussed areas where the group members were weak (Student interview, Girls' school, experimental group).

Moses: Since the new method was initiated, there has been a steady rise in my understanding of poetry because at first I knew nothing but afterwards I learnt a lot. CL helped the weak students' in my group improve in poetry (Student interview, Boys, experimental group).

Joel: I learnt to listen to the ideas of my group-mates and was ready to answer questions in front of the class. It removed fear in me. (Student interview, mixed school, experimental group).

From the fore going, it is clear that the students not only got helpful feedback during CL group learning but also participated in group activities and challenged each other's responses until they could reach the correct answer. They only needed the teacher when they got stuck. This implies that CL reduced their dependency on the teacher. This is unlike subjects in the teacher oriented classrooms who showed high level of dependency on their teachers and could not work on their own.

The effectiveness of CL on Students' attitudes and interest for poetry

The following excerpt reflects the students' responses to verbal inquiries regarding the effectiveness of CL on their attitudes towards and interest in poetry.

Researcher: How did you find the poetry lessons learnt in cooperative groups?

Sally: The lessons were quite interesting. You know at first I hated poetry totally and could not even attempt any questions concerning this. But after we used the new method things became better. We dramatized the poems and discussed them

in groups before presenting them to our class. (Student interview Girls school, Experimental group)

Amos: The way the poetry lessons were presented in cooperative groups has made me develop a lot of interest in poetry because we learn by ourselves with little help from our teacher. The presentations were very interesting because it is easier to understand other students when explaining things (Student interview, Boys school, experimental group).

Maikuri: I feel more interested in poetry now than before. It has helped me improve my speaking skills especially when talking in front of other students and even older people like our teacher. (Student interview, Mixed school, experimental group).

The students' anecdotes above indicate that before exposure to to the CL mode, most of them had a negative attitude towards poetry. But after they used the new method to learn poetry, their attitudes changed tremendously in that they all found the poetry lessons taught through CL quite motivating and interesting. They felt that CL lessons enhanced their learning by developing their self confidence, and socialization as well as their memory and attention. But the views of the subjects using regular teacher centered methods reflect a negative orientation towards poetry as illustrated in the following excerpts:

Researcher: How did you find poetry lessons as taught by your teacher?

Richard: Not interesting at all. In fact they are quite confusing. Poetry uses complex terminology and has a hidden meaning. Sometimes our teacher does not tell us the meanings of the hard words and phrases. Neither does she give us the deeper meaning of some poems. (Student interview, Boys school, control group).

Roselyn: Ah boring! I never understand the stylistic devices used in most poems. I have never liked poetry since I came to this school. In most cases I don't get the teacher's explanation that is why whenever a test is given I fail to interpret the poem correctly. (Student interview, Mixed school, control group).

Pamela: The lessons were quite confusing. Imagine the teacher was very fast. He did not teach us step by step as I wished. This discouraged me a lot because when I tried to understand, the teacher had already moved to something else (Student interview, Girls' school, control group).

From the excerpts above, there is glaring evidence of poor attitude towards poetry. An observation of these responses shows learners' overdependence on the teacher. This is because when freedom of participation is restricted; students' dependency is enhanced, adversely affecting achievement. The results indicate that in addition to blaming the teacher for being fast, not being elaborated or clear, the students see the teacher as as the sole giver of knowledge. This supports McCurdy's (1996) assertion that traditional methods of teaching do not motivate the learners because they do not have time for reflection and discussion of students' errors and/or misconceptions.

Conclusion

Upon reviewing the responses from both the experimental and control groups, it appears that students in the CL groups understood and enjoyed the poetry lessons better than their counter parts in the regular classrooms. The major outcomes from the research reported in this paper were:

i) The findings seem to confirm that Cooperative Learning had a highly positive impact on the way students and their teachers perceived the teaching-learning process in the language classroom.
ii) That while some of the teachers and students initially had a mixed reaction with regard to the usefulness of CL in the classroom, they later felt that change was desirable, especially when they realized that CL was capable of boosting and fostering a healthy interaction between her and the learners.
iii) Cooperative learning has a great potential to promote students affective skills. It can be used to boost positive attitudes of students who have developed an otherwise negative attitude.

From these findings it becomes apparent that Cooperative learning is an effective method of instruction in language education especially poetry instruction. This parrallels earlier studies by Johnson and Johnson (1989), Slavin (2000) and Giraud (1997) which say that that Cooperative learning is effective in enhancing students' achievement, attitude, motivation and self esteem.

Implications for teacher education

This research focused on the perspectives and experiences of students and their teachers with the use of Cooperative Learning in learning high school poetry. However, some important implications from the study warrant particular attention:

1. The research indicates that the CL provides a dramatic shift from the standard teacher oriented classroom teaching approach to a student centered learning environment. This is where student-student interactions and student teacher interactions are paramount. As such, the teachers' individual initiative is necessary in organizing and supervising group learning.
2. The use of Cooperative learning changes the teachers' role from that of a sole source and transmitter of knowledge to that of a task setter, facilitator and evaluator of the learning process. This implies that teachers require adequate training before using the approach in their classrooms.
3. Cooperative learning provides a setting for peer tutoring and opportunity for bright students to assist less competent ones. This seems to suggest the need to depart from the predominant expository teaching that gives the students very few opportunities to develop the socialization skills necessary for them to negotiate meanings and effectively co-participate in a learning community.
4. Education authorities should also encourage teachers of English and literature use CL in their teaching.

While CL provides teachers with a model to ensure students' success both in and outside the classroom, the teacher oriented

method of teaching is the most commonly used method of instruction in most secondary schools. Therefore, it will take a strong leadership to encourage teachers to make the necessary changes needed to implement CL in classrooms. Policies are required for the complete implementation of Cooperative Learning in Kenyan schools. Furthermore, there is need to provide teacher training through in-service training or workshops. At the same time, teacher education institutions ought to include CL techniques in their curricular in order to equip teachers with the knowledge, skills and attitudes of implementing CL in their areas of specialization.

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APPENDIX 1: THE STUDENT INTERVIEW GUIDE (SIG)

Student No. ----------School----------Class----------

1. My first feeling about learning poetry through coopearative learning was:
a) Exciting
b) Depressing
c) Fun
d) Confusing
2. What would you say your teacher should do when you are learning poetry using the Cooperative Learning method?
   a) Leave us alone and help us when we need her help
   b) Tell us what we should be doing
   c) Discuss with us
   d) Supervise our work
   e) Other-Explain
3. What do you think of the way poetry lessons were presented?
a) Easy to understand
b) Confusing and not easy to learn
c) Made me want to learn more about poetry
d) Made me hate the course
4) Learning poetry in CL groups was:
a) Source of anxiety for me
b) Something to look forward to
c) Not exciting for me
d) Others- expalin
5. How do you feel about poetry since you started learning in CL groups?
6. Did you like working in CL groups?
7) Do you get your work done better now since you have been working together in groups?

APPENDIX 2: TEACHER INTERVIEW GUIDE (TIG)
School……………………………Date
1. What was your first experience of having to use cooperative learning to teach poetry?
a) Frightening and a source of anxiety----why?
b) Assuring and optimistic----explain
c) Other---explain.
2. What do you think your role should be when teaching poetry using CL?
3. How has CL affected the teaching and learning of poetry lessons in your classes?
4. Compared to students who never used cooperative learning, do you think the students who used CL learnt well?
5. If you were asked to, would you use CL in your other courses?
a) Certainly…why?
b) Never….why not?

6. Do you think CL had an influence on the way the students learn the poetry course?
a) A lot…explain
b) Some…explain
c) No…explain

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