Impact of Collaborative Learning in Developing Reading Skills of Tertiary Level English as a Second Language (ESL) Learners

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ABSTRACT*: Collaborative learning approach (CLA) or small group discussions is identified as an effective means of language learning. In the process of collaborative learning, learners work together to achieve a common goal thus, each member tries to contribute and holds responsibility in achieving that goal (Colbeck, Campbell & Bjorklund, 2000).In the process of language learning, Reading is measured as a vital skill as it is the only means of access to written documents in a language (Alderson, 2000). Learners with sufficient reading skills tend to achieve their academic goals faster than those who lack them (Floris &Divina, 2015). This study was carried out in order to investigate the impact of Collaborative learning in developing reading skills of tertiary level learners. In order to investigate the effectiveness of Collaborative Learning on reading, Collaborative Strategic Reading Approach (CSR) which is a learner cantered reading approach closely related to cooperative learning theory (Klingner and Vaughn,1996; 1998; 2000) was identified and employed with a group of 67lower intermediate tertiary level participants. Data was collected through the mixed method approach. The qualitative data of the experiment verified that collaborative work during the reading activities lead the learners to learn and think significantly more and better. However, the statistical analysis did not prove this method as a better method than the traditional teaching method. Thus, pedagogical implications for English instruction at university level in Sri Lanka and suggestions for future research based on the findings to further validate the impact and effectiveness of collaborative learning are proposed.*

KEYWORDS: collaborative learning, collaborative strategic reading approach, preferred learning style.

INTRODUCTION

Collaborative learning approach (CLA) is a learner centered teaching approach which aims to achieve common learning goals through collaborative commitment. This approach enables learners to work in small groups in order to accomplish their goals. The success of the approach broadly depends on the commitment of the learners to collaborate with the team mates (Smith & MacGregor, 1992). Collaborative Strategic Reading (CSR) is a learner-centered comprehension strategic instruction approach which aims to develop reading comprehension of learners through the amalgamation of strategic reading and cooperative learning. Fostering learner autonomy and

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positive interdependence are main objectives of this approach (Klingner and Vaughn, 1996; Klingner and Vaughn1998; Klingner and Vaughn, 2000).

This study was carried out to study the impact of collaborative learning in developing reading skills of tertiary level learners of Sri Lankan context. In order to study this aspect the CSR approach which is a reading model which aims to teach reading through teaching strategies to the learners was employed. In this model, learners carry out reading tasks collaboratively through focusing on strategies. Furthermore, the perception of learners regarding this approach (CSR) and employing of strategies were also examined in this study.

Based on the above objectives following research questions were formed.
  1. Does Collaborative Learning Approach have an impact on improving reading skills of tertiary level learners?
     2. What are the tertiary level learners' perceptions of CSR?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Collaborative Learning Approach (CLA) is a learner centered approach which aims to develop group working skills to achieve a common objective that is generally done through assisting one another in order to learn their teaching material (Rao, 2019). Collaborative Learning is a popular means of learning as when the learners work in pairs or groups, they actively participate in their work and try to achieve better results. Also, such collaborative work can foster positive interdependence which can lead to positive interaction among learners (Deutsch, 1965). Collaborative Strategic Reading Instruction Approach (CSR) is a learner centered reading approach. It is mainly based on strategic reading instruction theory and cooperative learning theory.

Cooperative learning or small group discussions claims to be an effective means of language learning. It is theoretically based on cognitive developmental theory of Vygotsky, behavioral, theory and social interdependence theory. The cognitive developmental perspective basically stands on the theories of Vygotsky (1896-1934) and Piaget (1896- 1980). According to Vygotsky, students learn from a person who is more skilled and peers whereas, according to Piaget, when children have discussions with other children advancement in thinking occurs (Piaget, 1995). Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1962) also has strengthened this perspective. CSR also aims to develop Learner Autonomy (Little, 1991).

Collaborative Strategic Reading Instruction Approach (CSR)
Collaborative Strategic Reading approach combines strategic reading instruction with the cooperative learning approach. The approach helps learners improve their strategic reading ability and to take more responsibility for their own learning. CSR focuses on four strategies.

Preview: a pre reading strategy which mainly aims to trigger the background knowledge.

Click and Clunk: 'click and clunk' is a while reading strategy which is aimed at developing learners' vocabulary skills.

Get the Gist: This strategy aims to enhance learners' skill of identifying the main idea and supporting details.

Wrap Up: Students learn to *wrap up* by formulating questions and answers about what they have learned and by reviewing key ideas.

In the CSR process the students are assigned with 'roles' within their group.

• *Leader:* leads the group

• *Clunk Expert:* Assist the group in vocabulary difficulties

• *Announcer:* This student calls on different group members to read or share an idea.

• *Encourager:* This student watches the group and gives feedback.

• *Reporter:* Reports to the class the main ideas the group learned.

• *Time Keeper:* Sets the timer for each portion of CSR

To assist the students, cue sheets, learning logs and clunk cards are used as material. In the CSR approach the teacher acts a passive role during the lesson but provides ongoing assistance whenever it is needed.

Research conducted on CSR have shown the effectiveness of this approach in improving reading competence of learners from different backgrounds. Studies conducted by Klingner and Vaughn (1998, 2000) using primary students have shown significant improvement in comparison to control group in reading comprehension. In another study conducted in a public university in East-Azerbaijan province of Iran, employing 42 university freshmen, the effectiveness of the approach Modified Collaborative Strategic Reading (MCSR) on adult learners (Zoghi et al ,2010) has been observed. The effect of CSR on Taiwanese Engineering undergraduates in an EFL context was measured and effectiveness of the approach was re assured (Fan, 2009). A study conducted by Ziyaeemehr (2012) using CSR confirmed the importance of teaching reading strategies in developing academic reading ability of the learners. A more recent study, conducted by Novita (2018), proved the effectiveness of the approach in an ESP context. The study has proved the effectiveness of approach in developing English for Specific Purposes (ESP) reading skills.

Even though effects of CSR on different contexts have been widely investigated, the impact of Collaborative learning on developing reading skills of Sri Lankan tertiary learners have not been much investigated. Thus, this study aims to study the impact of Collaborative Learning in developing Reading Skills of Tertiary level English as a Second Language (ESL) learners.

METHODOLOGY

The research was carried out in the University of Peradeniya employing 67 lower intermediate level science based undergraduates. Quasi- experimental method was used in order to carry out the research. The data were gathered through mixed method. Pre-test and post-test and a questionnaire survey were used as quantitative instruments, whereas participant observations, group interviews were employed as qualitative instruments. Two lower intermediate level groups based on their language performance at the placement tests were identified. Before the intervention a pre-test, which consisted of questions to test the academic reading skills to be taught was conducted. A standard IELTS passage was chosen as the reading passage for the pre- test. At the end of the intervention, a post-test was conducted under same conditions. In order to carry out the intervention, 10 IELTS standard reading passages with a readability scale of around 50 were selected. Before the intervention the experimental group was given explicit explanations on how the CSR approach is carried out. The students were grouped accordingly and each student was assigned with a role. The students were given learning logs and cue sheets in order to record their work. The researcher assumed the role of the teacher in the experimental group. Another instructor with same qualifications was assigned as the teacher in the control group to carry out the same reading passages employing traditional teacher led method. The results of the Pre-test and the Post –test were analysed using the software Minitab. After the intervention, the questionnaire was administered in order to gather data on ESP learners' perspectives on CSR. Researcher observations were recorded. The group interviews carried out at the end of the intervention were recorded to analyse.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In order to answer to the first main research question data obtained from the pre-test and post-test were statistically analysed. Wilcoxin signed rank test was carried out for both experimental and control groups. The results of the Wilcoxin signed rank test proved that both approaches have been significantly effective in order to develop reading skills (Table 1). However, the Mann –Whitney test proved that there is no statistical significance in the p values of the groups. Thus, it is proved that both approaches have been effective in developing academic reading skills of learners. In order to strengthen result of the main question, data related to sub research questions were also statistically analysed. However, the results didn't show any significant improvement in the experimental group over the control group.

The second research question was investigated employing the data gathered from the questionnaire survey, group interviews, participant observation sheets and student logs. The results of these analyses proved that learners had a positive perception regarding CSR and they were keen in working in groups (Figure 1 and 2).

CONCLUSIONS/IMPLICATION

The statistical analysis didn't prove that Collaborative learning had a positive impact on teaching reading for undergraduates. This could have been due to the short length of the intervention. Internalisation of a new learning method may take time and thus, better results could have been achieved if the intervention had been carried out for a longer period. However, the questionnaire survey indicated the positive attitude learners held towards this method. Majority of the learners thought group learning is effective and during the interviews they expressed their preference towards the approach. Researcher observations also proves that such collaborative learning fosters positive interdependence and learner autonomy. Further, learners try to share their knowledge and scaffold. Also, the students engaged in this learning method get the opportunity to connect with different types of learners. Learners of different proficiency levels, different confidence levels as well as learners with different attitudes work together to achieve a common goal within a given time period.

FUTURE RESEARCH

As for future research avenues, It is suggested to carry out another study employing students from different disciplines, different proficiency levels and to conduct a study with a larger sample. Employing a multiple reading measures to assess the participants is another suggestion for further studies. It is suggested that in order to demonstrate the efficacy of the approach further research studies are carried out employing reading materials of other genres such as newspapers, magazine articles, narratives etc. Evaluating long term effects of collaborative learning is another recommendation for future studies. Examining the effectiveness of the approach in content learning is another important area worth studying.

Table 1: Results of the Wilcoxin Signed Rank

Group	P
Experimental	0.001
Control	0.000

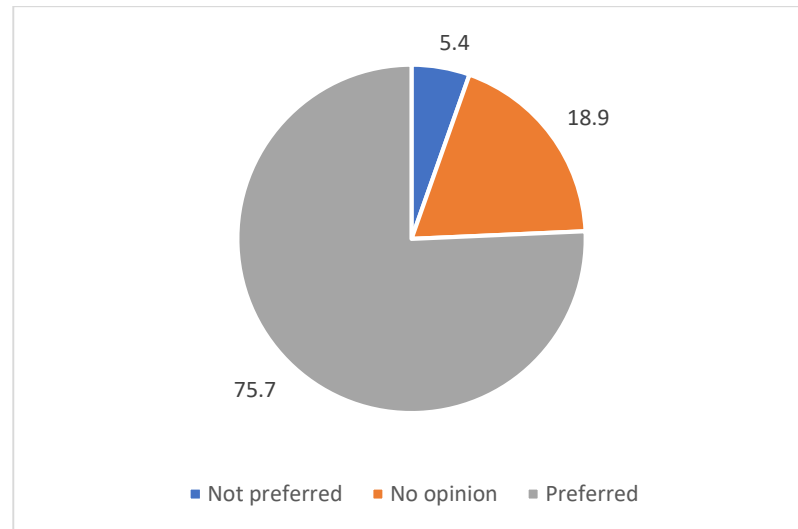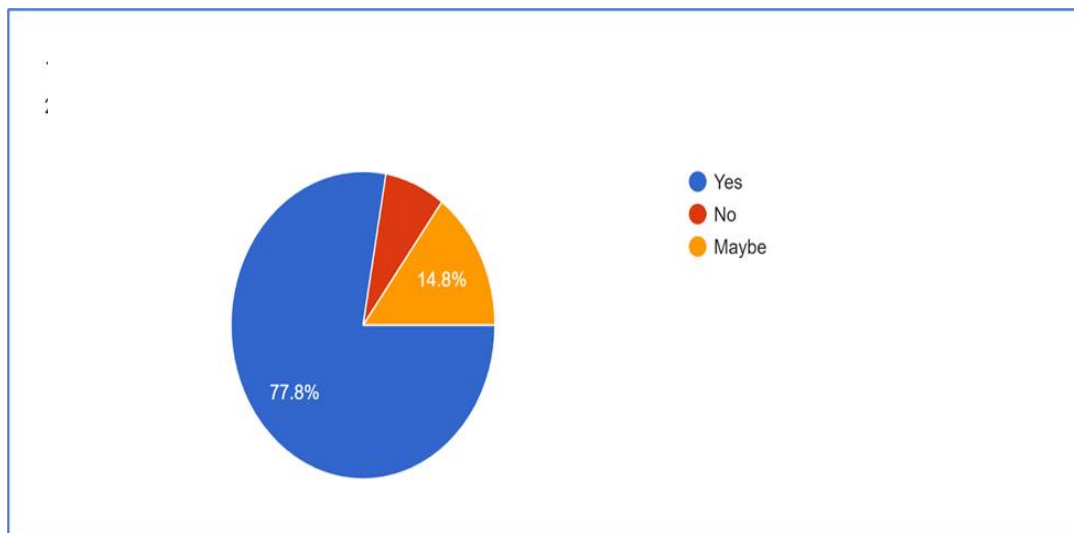**Figure 1: Learner Preference for CSR**

Figure 2: Preference for Group Work

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