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## AN OVERVIEW OF THE ROLE OF COLLABORATIVE LEARNING IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOMS

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**Abstract:**

*LANGUAGE IS A MEDIUM THROUGH WHICH THOUGHTS ARE ORGANIZED AND TRANSMITTED. IT IS THE FUNDAMENTAL MECHANISM IN HUMAN INTERACTION, COMMUNICATION, AND THE EVOLUTION OF HUMAN SOCIETY. FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING AND TEACHING REFERS TO THE TEACHING OR STUDY OF A LANGUAGE OUTSIDE OF THE ENVIRONMENT OR LOCATION IN WHICH IT IS COMMONLY OR FUNCTIONALLY SPOKEN.*

*THE CURRENT STUDY IDENTIFIES THE CHALLENGES ASSOCIATED WITH TEACHING AND LEARNING A FOREIGN LANGUAGE. THESE CHALLENGES ARE SHAPED BY VARIOUS FACTORS SUCH AS AGE, BACKGROUND, MOTIVATION, ATTITUDE, PERSONALITY, TIME, AND A RANGE OF OTHER FACTORS, WHICH MAY LIMIT EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT. AS A RESULT, FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING HAVE EVOLVED FROM TEACHER-CENTRED TO LEARNER/LEARNING-CENTRED ENVIRONMENTS. RESEARCH HAS REVEALED THAT FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHERS MUST IMPLEMENT VARIOUS STRATEGIES, APPROACHES, AND TECHNIQUES IN ORDER TO AVOID LIMITING THEIR ACTIVITY TO A SIMPLE TRANSMISSION OF KNOWLEDGE, AND FOCUS ON DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE SKILLS THAT WILL BENEFIT STUDENTS THROUGHOUT THEIR LIVES. THIS PAPER EXAMINES PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING (PBL) AS ONE OF SUCH MODERN TEACHING METHODS WHICH FACILITATES LEARNING THROUGH A PROBLEM-SOLVING APPROACH. THERE ARE FOUR PRINCIPLES OF PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING WHICH MUST BE ADHERED TO WHEN TAKING A PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING APPROACH: COLLABORATIVE, CONTEXTUAL, CONSTRUCTIVE AND SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING. THE ROLE OF COLLABORATIVE LEARNING IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM IS THE FOCUS OF THIS STUDY.*

*THE AIMS OF THE CURRENT PAPER ARE THREEFOLD. FIRST IS TO IDENTIFY THE CHALLENGES ASSOCIATED WITH TEACHING A FOREIGN LANGUAGE IN A CLASSROOM. SECOND IS TO EXAMINE MORE CLOSELY THE ROLE OF THE PBL METHOD AND COLLABORATIVE LEARNING WHILE EXEMPLIFYING COMPREHENSIVELY HOW COLLABORATIVE LEARNING IS USEFUL IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM. THIRD IS TO HIGHLIGHT THE BENEFITS OF COLLABORATIVE LEARNING BEYOND THE CLASSROOM AND HOW IT IMPACTS ON INDIVIDUAL STUDENTS.*

**Keywords:**

*FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING, CLASSROOM, PROBLEM BASED LEARNING, COLLABORATIVE LEARNING.*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Studying a foreign language allows for effective communication in that language and promotes an interdisciplinary perspective, while gaining intercultural understanding. In recent times, the surge in foreign language learning can be attributed to several reasons, ranging from the desire to improve employability, trend, migration, knowledge, and a host of other factors.

The process of acquiring a new language implies the understanding and internalization of the rules of the target language. These rules can differ substantially from one language to another. Russian, for example, lacks definite and indefinite articles. Objects in English are not gendered, whereas in most other European languages they are. This may pose a challenge for learners and hinder the ability of teachers to effectively attain their teaching outcomes. Manasia (2019, p. 204) explains that “this is why teachers must adapt to the needs of their students at all times. It comes with so many challenges that call for a change in teaching methods to create a productive and more casual environment for the students and teacher”.

Traditional teaching techniques focusing purely on the transmission of knowledge are no longer perceived as being effective, therefore a restructuring of the teaching/learning process has been on the horizon for some time. The complexities associated with teaching a foreign language can be overcome through the application of appropriate strategies. One such strategy is the Problem-Based Learning method (PBL) in which students learn through facilitated problem-solving. There are four core principles which must be adhered to when taking a problem-based learning approach: the contextual, constructive, self-directed, and collaborative learning.

Although all the four PBL learning principles have proved their usefulness and are used successfully on a large scale, for reasons of feasibility, our study will only focus on analysing the collaborative learning principle. This principle aims at encouraging students to exchange knowledge and to share ideas. It is opined that the benefit of the application of collaborative learning in a foreign language classroom goes beyond the classroom and may assist learners in developing beneficial skills which will be relevant even after school, in both private and social life. Learners may acquire skills such as social skills, critical thinking, leadership skills, the ability to communicate effectively, and a host of other abilities (Curelar, 2013, p.35).

There is therefore a need to understand the challenges associated with teaching in a foreign language classroom, as well as a need to examine the concept of collaborative learning and its role in assisting teachers to overcome challenges associated with teaching a foreign language, while passing on skills that will be beneficial to the learners beyond the classroom.

## 2. CHALLENGES ASSOCIATED WITH TEACHING A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

Foreign language teaching can be a complex task, especially, when dealing with students belonging to different cultures and backgrounds, as well as a host of variable factors including, but not limited to, listening problems, native language differences, cognitive variables (such as language aptitude, individual differences, and cognition), and affective variables (such as anxiety, motivation, and personality) (Cook, 2008, pp.150-155). Mirosław Pawlak (2012, p. xix) agrees on the existence of a “consensus that the rate of second/foreign language acquisition and the ultimate level of attainment is, to a large extent, affected by individual variation among learners, with a range of cognitive, affective and social variables accounting for the fact that some students are highly successful and others barely able to move beyond the level of rudimentary communication”.

These challenges also extend to situations where students may rely totally on the teacher for correct answers without attempting to solve problems on their own. This may lead to students being over-dependent on the teacher for answers without engaging in a more active process of learning, a scenario which corresponds to a traditional approach to education. It may also manifest in a situation



where a student lacks the confidence to speak out in front of the whole class to ask or answer questions. Also, there is the challenge of learners with learning disabilities or learners with a slower pace of learning. It may be practically impossible for a teacher to identify students with such limitations, as there is the need to balance effective teaching and managing time to cover the course content. An attempt by a teacher to teach at the pace of every student may create a difficult situation which may eventually lead to an imbalance and slow down the pace of learning.

As a result of these challenges, foreign language teaching and learning has evolved from teacher-centred to learner/learning-centred environments. In language classrooms, teachers use various teaching strategies to motivate the learners to learn. Teachers adopt novel techniques, methods, and approaches to make their teaching and learning more effective. Thus, when teachers understand various backgrounds, learning levels, as well as the needs of their learners, the teaching-learning process becomes more fruitful and meaningful (Rao, 2019, p. 331).

## 2.1. PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING AS A SOLUTION TO CURRENT TEACHING CHALLENGES

An effective strategy to overcome all the challenges mentioned in the previous section is the use of Problem-Based Learning (PBL) as a teaching method used in student-centred education. More and more teachers are showing interest in this modern approach due to the significant results it can generate. The PBL model is based on scenarios (constructed models) that describe a problem which represents the starting point of the given activity. The use of the problem aims to stimulate learners' interest, motivate them into defining the problem, brainstorm, issue hypotheses and propose solutions. It is highly important for the problem to be well-structured in order to stimulate interest and motivate students towards a deeper understanding of the concept or concepts underlying it. In addition to this, Cindy (2004, p. 235) implies that a good problem should not have a single correct answer, it should be complex enough in order to generate discussions.

Research has shown that students used to this teaching technique adopt a deep approach to learning. As mentioned on EDLAB (2020), “they form small groups to discuss a real-life problem or cases by activating their prior knowledge on the topic, relating the new information to their prior knowledge, structuring new ideas, and critically evaluating their findings. Depending on the complexity of the problem, learners collaborate with their peers and seek support from their tutors”. It is further explained by Cindy (2004, p. 235) that “problem-based approaches to learning have a long history of advocating experience-based education. Psychological research and theory suggest that by having students learn through the experience of solving problems, they can learn both content and thinking strategies.”

As already mentioned in the introduction, the PBL approach takes into consideration four principles namely the collaborative, constructive, contextual, and self-directed learning. All of them will be briefly treated, however collaborative learning will be the principle on which our study will focus and expand upon later in this paper.

First and foremost, it is important to mention *collaborative learning* as being one of the most effective ways to envisage education. It implies that we learn more effectively and become more autonomous when we collaborate and help each other formulate hypotheses in order to find solutions. Nowadays it seems that foreign language teachers have understood the importance of encouraging learners to work as a team through the exchange and analysis of shared ideas, distancing themselves from the norm of individual work and focusing on group work among learners.

*Constructive learning* is the second PBL principle that deserves our attention. Students should create networks of information, and new knowledge should be built upon the previously acquired knowledge. Teachers step down from their pedestal and no longer act as the main actors in the

education process. Instead they acts as a guide, model, and a facilitator monitoring students and encouraging them to explore and construct their own knowledge.

Equally important, learning can be *contextual* because it is much easier to remember something if it is exemplified and inserted in a context relevant to the learner. Hence, learning should occur in an environment where learners identify and relate abstract ideas to real-life situations. Researchers in the field of language teaching have become acutely aware of the importance of this principle. In contrast to current didactics, the traditional approach in foreign language classes was to teach grammar without inserting it in a communicative context. Fortunately, this attitude has been revised and currently there is no doubt that grammar brings real benefits in learning a language only if it is part of a communicative context. Păstae (2018, p. 110) pinpoints the importance of this learning principle by stating that “students need the simulation of ‘real worlds’ outside the classroom in order to put into practice the knowledge they get so that is why teachers need to link their lessons to real world learning”.

Lastly, *self-directed learning* is the fourth principle associated with the PBL method. It occurs when learners evaluate their individual learning capacity, set out goals as well as strategies to achieve these goals. In addition to displaying an active and autonomous attitude, students must be highly motivated in order to plan, monitor their own learning and be capable of self-evaluation. Therefore, self-directed learning aids students in employing effective self-directed and self-motivated learning skills and proactive thinking to continue learning as a lifetime habit.

## 2.2. BENEFITS OF COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

Collaborative learning is a deviation from the traditional teacher-centred model to the student-centred model. It focuses on the active participation of students in the learning process. “In collaborative classrooms, the lecturing/listening/note-taking process may not disappear entirely, but it lives alongside other processes that are based on students’ discussion and active work with the course material. Teachers who use collaborative learning approaches tend to think of themselves less as expert transmitters of knowledge to students, and more as expert designers of intellectual experiences for students - as coaches or mid-wives of a more emergent learning process.” (Barbara & Jean, 1992).

Due to the growing focus on communicative language teaching, numerous researchers (Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Noor Aileen et al, 2015) have discussed the numerous advantages of using cooperative learning in foreign language classrooms. In collaborative learning, the learners are mixed in terms of learning styles and abilities, some of them are quiet and some are outspoken. Several factors may account for this difference such as age, attitude, cognitive variables, confidence, and a host of other factors. Noor Aileen et al (2015) opine that “when students of different performance levels cooperate with each other in working towards achieving the desired goal, the students are not merely accountable for their learning process but are also responsible for their peers’ learning process as well.” Hence, the application of collaborative learning in a foreign language classroom will stimulate learners towards developing common goals, encouraging dependence on teamwork and building a tolerance for divergent viewpoints. It is beneficial for learners to hear diverse viewpoints; conflicts may arise, but in the long run they will learn how to accommodate and tolerate opinions they may not necessarily agree with. Thus, learners gain a wholesome understanding of the language, as they are required to reflect upon it from all angles. They develop their critical thinking skills while processing “new information and adjusting their viewpoints as new ideas are introduced” (“What is collaborative learning”, 2019).

Crandall (1999, pp. 226-245) also points to “the efficacy of cooperative language learning in reducing learner anxiety, fostering positive attitudes toward language learning and improving self-esteem”. It aids learners in developing public speaking skills by learning to organize their thoughts



and present them cohesively, to also express and defend their opinion to their classmates and also challenge and build a framework of ideas collaboratively with others.

Furthermore, it is believed that the use of collaborative learning in teaching promotes an advanced level of cognitive use and aids learners in retaining knowledge better compared to learners who study individually. Gilles (2007) highlights the idea that group speaking practice helps students explore different language structures and allows them to develop new patterns of thought. Noor Aileen et al (2015) further state that it is true that groups naturally learn through discussions, clarification of ideas and evaluation of other's ideas, and this way language structure will be more easily internalized and fixated in the long term memory.

Candy (1991) reiterates the ideas previously expressed by stating that “a flexible learning atmosphere which is shaped by cooperation rather than competition is claimed to increase students' level of autonomy”. In addition to a better cementing of information in the long-term memory, collaborative learning also builds important skills that learners will use outside the classroom as well. For instance, the use of collaborative learning in foreign language teaching helps in the development of organizational and leadership skills (Paliță, 2012, pp. 2-9). In the process of having to organize, assign, and teach, learners acquire skills on how to manage both themselves and others while leading productively.

### 3. CONCLUSION

In this era of globalization, there has been a spike in the demand for intercultural communication competence, to enable people to interact well with each other irrespective of cultural and social differences. One of the motivations for learning a foreign language is the acquisition of knowledge of the language, the culture, and relevant skills that may be useful in social interaction. There are inevitable challenges that are associated with effective teaching of a foreign language which may be influenced by a range of factors. Strategies have evolved in teaching over time to combat these challenges, one of such strategies is the problem-based learning approach and one of the principles of this strategy is collaborative learning.

This paper has been able to identify the challenges that may arise through the course of teaching a foreign language and suggests the PBL method as one way to address these challenges. Although the implementation of the PBL approach globally still requires time and research, being a relatively new teaching method, the principles of learning from a PBL perspective (collaboration, construction, contextualization and self-direction) have revealed their efficiency and can be used successfully on a large scale in any subject. This current study has identified and examined in closer detail one of the PBL learning principles, namely collaborative learning alongside its role and effectiveness in a foreign language classroom. It is evident that collaborative learning is a relevant tool in the hands of educators in eradicating challenges that may obstruct effective learning in a foreign language classroom. In addition to the benefits regarding the quality of internalizing the specific information more effectively by constructing and discovering it themselves, learners also acquire skills ranging from leadership skills, public speaking skills, time management and teamwork, that will be of use outside the classroom and help to continue learning as a lifetime habit.

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