Critiquing Collaborative Language Learning: A Qualitative Study of Teachers' Perceptions

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Abstract
Collaborative language learning, followed as a language teaching and learning methodology in many countries, is often critiqued with mixed arguments. To some, while keeping in view its social aspect where learners work on common projects intending to partake in collective decision making and intellectual engagement, collaborative language learning is more productive than the traditional way of teaching and learning a second/foreign language. To others, because of different requirements for its successful implementation, collaborative language learning becomes a difficult practice where the cost exceeds the benefits. To know the problems and prospects of collaborative language learning, in the present study, data were collected through semi-structured interviews from teachers of both public and private sector schools of district Mardan. Through purposive sampling, data were collected from 40 teachers (20 each from public and private sector schools). The findings reveal that besides many positive aspects, there are some negative aspects of collaborative learning where the prominent one is the loss of an individual's authority and creativity, promotion of totalitarian approach, and overlooking of the shy students. It can be a useful tool for language education provided some requirements including teacher training, availability of proper space, and classroom size, etc. are tackled properly.
Keywords: Collaborative Language Learning, Teachers' Perceptions, Traditional Language Learning

Introduction
Like many other fields, the teaching profession has been influenced by globalization that makes today's teachers a part of the larger global teaching community (Tahir, Qadeer & Asif, 2017). In this way, efforts have been made, at least in the developed countries, to bring uniformity in teaching and learning. In countries like Pakistan, apart from many other constraints, the medium of instruction appears to be a major challenge where methodological issues surpass other technical issues. In Pakistan, at least three different education systems are in practice and different stakeholders have advocated for different systems. Efforts have been made to restructure and centralize the education system, but they have proved fruitless so far. Adopted as a compromise candidate at the time of independence in 1947 (Haque, 1993, p. 14), English is still the official language of Pakistan. Efforts have been made at different levels a show to make learning accessible as well as more effective for the learners. In this regard, different methodologies are at work depending on the different educational contexts. In most of the public sector schools, English is taught through the traditional teaching methodologies where the most prominent one is the Grammar Translation Method. On the other hand, in private sector schools, some of the modern teaching methodologies are at work. There are differences in the teaching and learning methodologies of different schools. English, being the official language in Pakistan, is taught from Grade 1 but most of the students cannot effectively communicate in English (Kamran, 2008). Expectations from the learners to communicate properly in English is natural but the results are not satisfactory. This failure is usually linked with language policies, overcrowded classrooms, untrained teachers, etc. (Jabeen, 2013) but defective teaching methodologies are considered as the prominent reason. In this regard, Ahmad (2004) claims that the teaching of English is never taken for functional and communicative purposes. Furthermore, the teacher-centered approach is usually used in a classroom where apart from one-sided teaching, textbooks, and other written materials are relied upon.

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As language is believed to be a social and cultural activity using which people not only create ideas but also share these ideas with people. Therefore, language development is more rapid when it is learned and practices together (Gibbons, 2010). Bruffee (1973, p. 634) says that "people today are challenging and revising many social and political traditions which have heretofore gone unquestioned…everywhere, collaborative action increasingly pervades our society." Learning and education for Rorty (1979) is a conversation. For him, learning and teaching is a social act rather than a cognitive one. As total immersion in the language learning process is encouraged, collaborative language learning has started taking place in language classrooms. He claims that learning is a confrontation of the community members where through dialogue, learning takes place. For him, learning is a type of shift in the relation of a person with other persons. It does not occur inside individuals. Trimbur (1989) believes that those who say that collaborative language can be interrupted by the asymmetrical power relationship among the group members have weak versions as in collaborative learning differences and contradictions among the group members can be resolved through common work. He adds that when the learners are organized non-hierarchically where opportunities for participation are available to the group members, collaborative learning can turn more fruitful. There may be consensus or dissensus but in the end, consensus may be achieved through discussion. He quotes Benjamin (1986) and says that collaborative learning situations can motivate the producers (participants) to produce with more collective energies leading to ideal speech situations. Trimbur (1989, p. 615) says that

> it can incite desire through common work to resolve, if only symbolically, the contradictions students face because of the prevailing conditions of production the monopoly of expertise and the impulse to know, the separation of work and play, allegiance to peers, and dependence on faculty esteem, the experience of cooperation and the competitiveness of a ranking reward system, the empowering sense of collectivity and the isolating personalization of an individual's fate.

There is some criticism as well on collaborative language methodologies calling it a challenge to individual autonomy. Collaborative learning can be a challenge when dealing with a multicultural group where often differences in thinking, cultural backgrounds, and social values, etc. Occur (Eilisha, 2007). However, Wong (2004) says that this cultural difference is a tool of understanding and broadening cultural knowledge which can be an important function of good pedagogy.

Many researchers (Dillenbourg, 1999; Trimbur, 1989) have worked on the usefulness of collaborative learning but in the Pakistani context, there is little work on collaborative learning in general and collaborative language learning in particular. This study aimed to know the problems and prospects of collaborative language learning and the extent to which this methodology can be implemented in our context.

This study is based on teachers' perception, that when taken and worked on, takes the role of reflections which is an essential part of teachers' professional development (Ahmad, Ahmad, & Hussein, 2018). The current research has implications for teachers where they may know what effects the specific technique of teaching can have on students' learning. Besides, this study may help curriculum developers and policymakers. Collaborative language learning is often propagated to be an all-set technique for language learning where the emphasis is on communicative abilities but it has some limitations as well. This research helps make the teachers aware of its limitations when dealing with students of mixed ability and mixed style, alarming teachers of its blind use. The teacher can benefit from this research in using such techniques that give equal opportunities for learners' participation. In this way, by being actively involved in collaborative language learning, learners can improve their communicative skills.

Literature Review

Usually, there are four modes of interaction in classrooms: the first is the whole class, where a teacher delivers a lecture or the students are given a movie for watching, and the students do nothing except listening, watching, and note-taking; the second is the whole class teacher-led discussion wherein the whole class, one person is talking; the third is that where the learners are grouped; in the fourth mode, the students are asked to work alone (Jacobs, 2014). These methodologies should be used for different purposes but in Pakistan, most often teacher-led classrooms are the usual trend without considering the purpose or need for the development of a particular skill.

Some different approaches and theories support one way of teaching and learning or the other way. Among them is humanistic psychology. According to Nunan (1992), humanistic psychology has influenced education and related learning and teaching processes in several ways. In this regard, teaching methodologies like Suggestopedia, Community Language Learning, and the Silent Way emerged. These methodologies mostly catered to the humanistic aspects. Humanistic psychology not only influenced teaching methodologies but rather it also worked for the promotion of a learner-centered approach in curriculum development. Nunan (1988) says that traditional curriculum is different from the learner-centered curriculum in the sense that in the latter, the curriculum is a collaborative effort between the learners and teachers where learners are given opportunities to be actively involved in the decision-making process that what to teach and how to teach. Based on the idea of humanistic psychology, one such teaching method is collaborative language teaching. It is a method of teaching where the lecture method is transformed into student-centered learning. Dillenbourg (1999) defines collaborative learning as a situation where two or more learners learn together. He says the two or more learners can work in pairs, a group of 3 to 5, and a class of 20 to 30, a community where hundreds or thousands of people participate, or a society with millions of people. In these groups, the learners learn a course, course material, work on problem-solving activities, or learn work practice. They work together through face-to-face or computer-mediated activities. This is what collaborative learning is used for and practiced in a situation where developing communicative abilities are focused on. Such collaboration helps achieve the common goal of students involved in learning. Numan (1992) considering the reasons as to why collaborative language teaching should be opted for, says that several reasons support collaborative language learning and teaching. He says that in language education, learners, teachers, researchers, and curriculum developers can collaborate for several reasons. They can do so to experiment with learning and teaching in alternative ways. Instead of promoting the philosophy of competition, these stakeholders may work for cooperation and collaboration. They may create an environment where teachers, learners, and researchers are learning from each other and bring learner-centeredness in their programs. The students not only learn but they also learn about learning and develop their awareness about self and the target language.

Collaborative learning is based on Vygotsky's (1986) sociocultural theory where he claims that apart from internal psychological aspects, learning is more an internal social factor. Here the emphasis is on culture that leads to internal development. He says that "Every function in the child's development appears twice: first, between people (interpsychology) and then inside the child (intrapsychology) (p. 57)." He means to say that all higher-order skills come from what relationships individuals have. For Vygotsky (1978), it is through speech that thinking is developed thus leading to knowledge and other types of learning. The individuals construct their meaning according to context when they interact with other individuals. These external experiences help develop a child's learning and knowledge. Keeping in view the importance of social context, Vygotsky (1978) says that it is not the teachers who teach, rather learners learn more from their environment. Regarding the implication of sociocultural theory, Mahn (1996) thinks that this theory, being an educational theory, has been increasingly used in the field of education and education research. To Vygotsky, there are two types of development: one type of development is the actual development without the help of any other person; the other type of development is that development that takes place with the help of a fellow. The development that happens because of the individual's capacity to carry out some tasks is known as the actual development. On the other hand, the development that happens because of the help of other people is known as potential development. It is later that is the concern of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. Both the actual and potential development is known as the zone of proximal development. In this methodology, students work on different tasks with little help from the teacher and solve the problems by themselves in understanding the contents. This happens not in a haphazard way; rather, says Dillenbourg (1999), setting initial conditions is very important. He adds that for interaction to occur, carefully designing the situation is of great importance. While designing the situation, the teacher asks several questions related to the size of the group, the criteria for selection of the group, the representation of gender, and the particular role they play. Even the amount of knowledge the group members have is also taken into consideration. It means that because of these queries, setting favorable initial conditions is a challenging task. But once taken care of, the learning outcomes are too high. To Dillenbourg, setting interaction rules by the teacher is also an important aspect of constructing groups for collaborative learning. Who to participate and when is to be

determined by the teacher in advance. Everybody's point of view is given a place, but proper monitoring is often required. The teacher's role remains not that of a tutor, rather that of a facilitator. The teacher this role plays a very important role in the success of collaborative learning. In this way, the teacher directs the group members in participating to the maximum where every group member is encouraged. Dillenbourg (1999) says that there are some essential characteristics of being collaborative. The first characteristic is that a group is called collaborative if the group members have almost the same level (in terms of knowledge, degree of expertise, and status in the community to perform the same actions). The second characteristic, he adds, is the pursuit of a common goal. There is a debate that although the general goals can be a common one, but the task-specific goal shared by all the participants can have some differences. These shared goals can be set partly at the beginning of the task that may be negotiated later on with the progress of the task. The third characteristic, Dillenbourg suggests, is the division of labor. He says that there is a difference between cooperation and collaboration. In cooperation, the work is done individually but some help is shared when needed. In collaboration, on the other hand, the group members work together. However, there may be some fixation of responsibilities depending on the level of the task. The group members not only negotiate the task but also negotiate their roles.

Collaborative learning, says Hamada (2013), provides a comparatively powerful way for increasing the level of learning, the retention of the material, and the involvement of the learners. In this technique, the learners' interaction and collaboration reach a level that is sometimes impossible to be achieved individually. Here openness to work increases which in return builds trust and self-esteem among the group members. The chances of achievements also hit the peak. It manages the behavior of the learners through mutual dependability and adaptation to the challenging situation. Collaborative learning is most helpful when developing communicative abilities is the main goal. But, it is not a straightforward way. Collaborative learning is the arrangement of how to tackle knowledge dissemination as opposed to seating arrangement where a productive environment is created for the shy and introverted students (Jacob, 2014). It is more a social approach to doing things. It is the shift from a teacher-centered approach to the student-centered approach where learning is constructed what Vygotsky (1978) calls social context comprising of peers and the society. This approach being student-centered means that learners are less dependent on their teachers. However, according to Gillies (2006), it does not mean that teacher's role finishes. It is, only the role of the teacher changes from being a source and provider of knowledge to a mere knowledge facilitator. In this way, the teacher directs the students on what role to play in the group, how to express ideas, and take help from one another to be more creative.

Keeping in view the social dimension of collaborative learning, Brown (2008) says that collaborative learning can play a vital role in breaking down students' silence where they are often afraid of open participation. This encouragement leads to the broadening of the circle of making new friends, developing mutual understanding and support (Economides, 2008). This situation leads to the learners' autonomy where they can decide their roles themselves. Learners' autonomy, which results as an outcome of the continuous opportunities for the learners involved in collaborative language learning, is believed to be one of the aspects of the already discussed humanistic approach. Learners' autonomy is nowadays considered as a positive factor in the learning process that focuses on self-initiated and self-standing learning (Jacobs & Tan, 2015). In this regard, Halliday (cited in Yasmin & Naseem, 2019) says that autonomy lives with the social world the learners that they take with themselves.

The mention of different opportunities for collaborative language learning does not mean that collaborative language learning and teaching are all friendly. There are some challenges as well that make collaborative learning and teaching a challenging task. There are times when the learners do not accept responsibilities for what they are asked to teach (Vaughan, 2007). The learners being habitual of passive learning, says Dabbagh & Kitsantas (2005), may also find it difficult to become active learners in the form of student-centered learning. This means that collaborative learning may have both its opportunities as well as challenges.

Research Methodology

To know the advantages and disadvantages of collaborative language learning, a qualitative approach and interpretive paradigm were used. For this purpose, a sample of 40 English teachers was selected

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from different high schools of district Mardan. The schools included both public and private sector schools where interviews were conducted with both male and female English teachers.

The study draws upon Lev Vygotsky's (1986) sociocultural theory, also known as socio-cognitive theory. This theory says that social interaction and negotiation help construct knowledge. This theory is based on the theme that instead of isolation, social interaction leads to cognition. In this regard, Mahn and Holbrook (1996) believe that the earlier approaches towards learning mainly focused on internal psychological and behaviorist domains while Vygotsky took learning as an external social interaction that is internalized as a development.

The limitation of this research is that in addition to interviews, classroom observation may have added more to the worth of the study.

Results and Discussions

In this section, the results obtained through interviews are presented. In the interview, questions related to the advantages and disadvantages were included. These were open-ended questions where the participants were free to bring whatever experience they got about collaborative language learning according to the questions asked.

To know the advantages of collaborative language learning, the participants were encouraged to share their views on some of the positive aspects of the method. It was reported that collaborative learning can promote confidence and can be more beneficial for students who are introverts. It was claimed that this methodology is introvert-friendly as it helps the learners to open up in an environment that is usually avoided by the learners. It was stated that fellow students are the source of motivation. In this type of task, the learners themselves find ways how to solve a problem when there is no intervention from the teacher. This is called learners' autonomy. In this way, the student's participation is ensured that positively contributes to the success of the task and in developing communicative skills. This is similar to what Nurhayati, Rosmaiyadi, and Buyung (2017) and Muttaqin (2016) have found. Self-confidence leads to a stage where the group members achieve faith in themselves and are not afraid of hindrances in the achievement of their goals. Through confidence, the individuals take the situation and themselves with a very positive outlook. They develop a level of trust that leads to a successful being.

To know the level of interdependence, many participants believed that the group members are interdependent, but this interdependence is usually a fruitful one. Jacobs (2014) calls this interdependence as positive interdependence where, if one group member is at a loss, the other helps. This is the help that makes collaborative language learning more effective and durable. The interdependence creates a sense of relationships among the group members who start acknowledging the role of fellow members in their success. They build confidence and trust in others and a sense of friendship and harmony is created in the class, leading to a positive learning environment. Laal (2013) also calling it positive interdependence, believes that in such situations, an individual's success is dependent on the group's success. All members of the group rely on each other in such an environment to achieve the common goals and they believe that there is always a value in accessing the task together. Related to the expression of ideas, it was shared by some of the interviewees that in collaborative language learning, the students are made more focused where the only center remains the task itself. The learners reach a level where they express their ideas in more elaborative and confident ways. They not only present their ideas but also listen to the other fellows with attention.

Critical thinking, a very important aspect of collaborative language learning, is the other positive aspect that makes the members creative. While talking and handling the tasks, it was reported that the learners' critical thinking is developed by the repetitive interaction and argumentation in collaborative learning. The participants thought that collaborative learning is more fun where the learners learn through a range of entertaining activities. Through collaborative learning, the learners are made more responsible by making them realize that they are independent learners where they are seeking a solution to the problems themselves. In this methodology, the students' opinions which are based on logical reasoning are given value.

Regarding social achievement, it was reported that the environment provided through collaborative learning often results as a launching pad for making new friends and broadening the social circle. Brown (2008) makes it resemble the breaking of students' cultural silence.

While sharing the challenges, quite interestingly, there were participants who, unlike the others, believed that collaborative language learning can be a challenge for introverted students. They

claimed that usually, the introverts lose their confidence more when some authoritative fellow learners take control of the group. It was added that it is often difficult for the teachers also to control the different groups involved in collaborative learning where individual attention remains a dream. Here, often roles shifts and sometimes, it becomes difficult who is to do what, where, and when. While suggesting a remedy for successful teamwork in collaborative language learning, it was said that the learners should be allowed to choose their group members on themselves. In this way, they will select those with who they are comfortable with. Gradually, the introverted learners get the confidence to be active in other groups as well.

Another drawback reported in the data is that often the group members are less concerned whether the other members are participating or not. In this way, very few talk and collaborate. Here lies a great responsibility on the part of the teacher who is the facilitator. The teachers should monitor the groups properly which is only possible when there is a small class. In overcrowded classrooms, it becomes very difficult for the teachers as well to have an inside role. Instead of a positive aspect, this drawback leads collaborative language learning to a situation where the group members become less concerned about the other fellows.

It was also shared that sometimes because of the lack of training or awareness about collaborative learning, the teachers do not pass the responsibility to the learners where repetitive interruption from the teacher gives less opportunity to the learners, and hence, the goal of developing independent learners is often not fulfilled. It was further added to overcome this problem, the teachers should understand their role first. Therefore, the teachers should work both for planning the groups in terms of group members' selection and managing when the activity is in progress.

Discussing the length of collaborative language learning tasks, the opinion was that these types of tasks usually take more time as compared to other traditional ways of teaching. It was added that it is not only the performance of task but planning that takes most of the time. To achieve the maximum social results, the teachers usually change the group formation where the members are exchanged. Although maximum social and behavioral benefits are achieved in this way but the time taken usually prolongs.

Very few shared that cultural differences can also present challenges both for a teacher as facilitator and the group members. This difference, they claimed, not only affects their speaking but also their values and attitude towards learning. Sometimes, it creates challenges for the group members in understanding as well as accommodating each other.

It was added that collaborative language learning can be a challenge in situations where the task is difficult. There are occasions that the team members do not complete their allotted parts of the assignment that sometimes leads to chaos. Shea (1995) calls this a hurdle in understanding the task. To overcome this challenge, few participants shared that the topic should be discussed ahead in the class or before starting the collaborative activity. In this way, knowing the task, concepts, and relevant topic, the participants get enough support to participate.

Conclusion

As obvious from the findings, there are both prospects and challenges of collaborative language learning. Collaborative language learning seems interesting and promising but when not dealt with systematically, a time comes when the challenges surpass the advantages. How to overcome the challenges is a question answering which can make collaborative language learning a successful model of pedagogy. To us, as shared by some of the participants as well, giving different roles, like a group leader, secretary and members cannot only make the participants of the group responsible for active communication and learning but also the introverts can be inspired and sometimes pushed to make an important contribution to the task completion. Besides, to make collaborative language learning more effective, the group size may be brought to a few members instead of large groups. This type of peer interaction may lessen the stress of interaction. Furthermore, the students should present ideas one by one and should be made aware of the rules of turn-taking. Keeping in view the above discussion, it is clear that collaborative language learning is an advantage as well as a disadvantage, but it depends on the teacher as well as the learners how effectively to perform the task and develop their communicative abilities. Besides, the textbooks developers also need to add activities in the English textbooks where learners can have opportunities to work in collaboration with other fellows. This will not only create opportunities for developing language skills but also social skills.

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