

# Implications of Collaborative Learning and the ‘Conversation of Mankind’ for L2 Teaching

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**Abstract.** For students to better competitive in the globalized world, it is of great significance to be specialized in knowledge and soft skills as well. The paper, based on Kenneth Bruffee’s Collaborative Learning and the ‘Conversation of Mankind’, addresses the importance of collaborative learning in L2 Acquisition. The term "collaborative learning" refers to a wide varieties of educational strategies including the combined intellectual efforts of teachers and students. Students are especially required to work in groups of two or more, working together for understanding answers or meanings or producing a product. Collaborative learning uses a learner-centered approach in which participants work together to acquire knowledge. It facilitates students in an environment where each one develops by learning and students exchange knowledge continuously to complete a common task. Effective collaborative learning is developed through equal work, promoting cooperation among the members of the group instead of competition between individuals. The paper points out the benefits of collaborative learning as well as the problems which may make collaborative learning difficult, which is intended for the teachers to see how to make collaborative learning more effective and practical and thereby arouse the students’ interest to get themselves involved in the class.

**Keywords:** Collaborative learning; Benefits; Problems; Implications

## 1. Introduction

L2 teaching has a growing demand for innovation; collaborative learning has caught the attention of both researchers and teachers as an effective way of enhancing the ability of student learning and the effectiveness of teaching. Collaborative learning is the variety of educational methods involving joint intellectual efforts of students, or students and teachers together. University teachers increasingly utilize interactive engagement and social/collaborative learning methods in their classes to achieve better learning outcomes. These methods can achieve deeper engagement by the students and incorporate more formative assessment to implement learning. Students can get engaged actively in the study and thereby improve their learning. They can not only have a good command of the subject matter, but they can learn how to get involved in the communication with people, how to cooperate with each other, how to respect various views, and how to grow as continuing learners in their lifetime. Teaching students to “listen carefully, think critically, participate constructively and work productively to solve common problems should be the priorities of all teachers.” [1] Many research-based methods like peer instruction [2], think-pair-share [3], and cooperation group problem solving [4]; share some basic features that are considered to facilitate learning across wide varieties of contexts. However, even with so many advantages, poor empirical evidence has proved its’ effectiveness at the level of college. Luckily, the demand for noncompetitive, collaborative group work is addressed in a number of higher education literatures. Furthermore, most of the research on collaborative learning has been conducted in many disciplines. This paper is intended to study the benefits and problems of collaborative learning and its’ application in L2 teaching.

## 2. Literature Review

In America, Collaborative education began in the 1970s as a response to the previous decade’s mentality that students who needed help and didn’t seek this help did not belong in college. As a

result of this, colleges began providing peering tutoring and in-class group work, which led to the discovery that these forms of collaboration did not change what people learned, but the way how they learned. Kenneth Bruffee asserts, in *Collaborative Learning and the 'Conversation of Mankind'*, that as long as the complexities of collaborative learning are appreciated, it will become a more trusted and successful classroom tool. [5] Collaborative learning, developed as an alternative to the traditional classroom, changed the social context of learning in which teachers indirectly instructed through peer tutoring, peer criticism and classroom group work. Bruffee takes the collaborative learning classroom as the ideal environment which will provide the kind of social context in which normal discourse can occur. Bruffee uses the term "normal discourse" to describe the communication which takes place among like-minded individuals, in which the expectations of the content shared and the direction of exchange are implicitly understood, inadvertently excluding those who cannot or choose not to meet such standards. And fortunately, "no student is wholly ignorant and inexperienced; every student is already a member of several knowledge communities". [5] Therefore, when dialogue among college students operates under the parameters of normal discourse, no one can possibly qualify as someone unsuitable for participation, and everyone offers something unique, enlightening, and original to the body of shared knowledge being topically discussed. Though potentially limiting, learning the rules of normal discourse is an important component of collegiate studies, especially in the forms of peer-tutoring and dialoguing toward revision, for such discourse dominates the professional world in which students aim to work. Interestingly, classroom collaboration (when implemented properly) is so powerful because the nature of truth is collaborative in nature.

### **3. The Benefits of Collaborative Learning in L2 Teaching**

Collaborative learning is one way of introducing students to the process communities of knowledge members use to create connections between symbolic structures and reality--how they establish knowledge and allow the community to grow (through the abnormal discourse that renews the normal discourse). [5] To students, the knowledge is more easily retrieved during peer conversations, which can give the students environment of comfortable critical thinking. Roskelly discusses how important it is to create a smaller group setting instead of having a "front of room" because instead of having the teacher stand up front and lecture the whole time, the teacher is on the same level as the students. [6] Students are much more comfortable because there is less pressure and more interaction. Engaging students in conversations can help improve their communication skills. The more they are involved in conversations, the more that they gather ideas and learn how to share theirs. It is important that they develop good communication skills to help them improve in conversations. It is in conversations that they formulate better ideas and become more analytical because of the difference in their points of view. Group work can push students to participate and eliminate the intimidation of making presentation in front of the whole class. Students can speak on equal terms, allowing for a better flow of opinions and ideas. They can offer unique perspectives as individuals and opinions are more easily accepted because they are not the definitive, confidence slaying judgments of a teacher. A suggestion could be accepted or ignored based on their own discretion, which makes it easier to retain their own voices as learners.

### **4. The Problems Existing in the Implementation of Collaborative Learning in L2 Teaching**

Social interaction between students is important and it does have impact on learning. One, when put in a group setting, speaks and also listens by interacting with others. They learn about themselves and also the environment surrounding them. When it comes to group work, many people will agree that they believe in the idea of group work, but often, teachers admit that they hesitate to use it in the classroom because the students may use the time to socialize instead of working on the assignment, and group work often means the teacher is pressed for time to teach the lesson, which results in the gap between discussing group work and putting group work into action.[7] Using collaborative learning may be an uncomfortable pedagogical shift for some teachers who are used to

being the expert because of their content mastery. Teachers do not always like this approach because it's not what they are used to, and doesn't give them as much power to control what happens in the classroom. Many people believe that group work is a political idea because power relationships are blurred when control is put in a small classroom setting. Teachers fear group work because of this idea, and students often fear group work because of the distribution of work between peers. There isn't one single person who is put in charge, which makes it more difficult for people to determine how to discuss the assignment. [6] While participating the group work, the students may experience excluding others and being excluded from conversation under the system of normal discourse. They may feel bored with or alienated from the group conversations, especially those in which they remain silent because they feel deficient on the topic being discussed.

## 5. Collaborative Learning: Challenges and Opportunities

While establishing a collaborative classroom would be a terrifically rewarding opportunity, it also has quite a few challenges and dilemmas. For each teacher, it is hard to take steps out of the teacher-centered, lecture-driven pattern of teaching, especially the first step. Forming group work needs a demanding but essential reviewing of the syllabus, in the light of course content and time distribution. If any amount of the time in class is taken as a crucial social space for improving understanding about the materials regarding the course, or if some of the time after class is dedicated to study groups or group programs, how can the teachers design the class time left? Can the teacher guarantee the students are learning and mastering the skills and ideas required by the subject, and meanwhile emphasize all the content of the course? Teaching in collaborative environment arouses the tension between student learning and course content. The more the teachers get involved in collaborative learning, the more problems arise. The roles of the teachers and students are changing; the courses content are to be reshaped, as well as the student competence and the definition of teachers. Yet, it is the desire to drive students by getting them actively involved in classes that push the teachers into collaborative teaching. Nevertheless, desiring to be a helper of collaborative learning and doing well with it are totally two different things. In all kinds of teaching, forming and leading group work does time to learn and practice. Also for students, learning to do well in groups is a long way to go. Most teachers begin with sincere efforts. With their common efforts, collaborative classrooms excite students and teachers. The collaborative learning process sets what it means to question, learn and understand in accordance with others. Collaborative learning needs responsibilities, commissions, and sensitivity, but the result can be a community of learners where each is welcome to participate and develop.

## 6. Conclusions

The Interaction Hypothesis [8] proposes theoretically that one of the most effective methods to learn a new language is to learn through personal and direct interaction. This theory is applied specifically in the acquisition of a foreign or a second language. This hypothesis can be illustrated with figure 1 below:

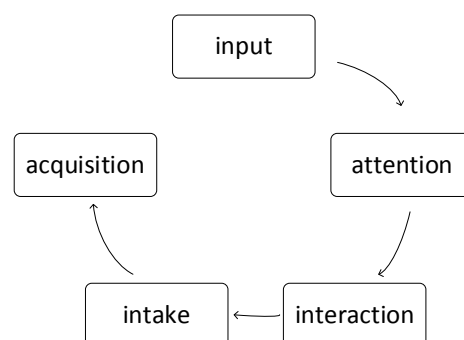


Figure 1. The Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1995)

As English teachers, it is important to make the classroom a warm and welcoming environment where students are invited to share their ideas with each other. Teachers must be willing to take risks and allow the students to think for themselves and use group work in order to help the students learn for themselves. Engaging students in conversations in various subject matters is extremely helpful for them to understand and also relay their points of view. At the same time, their understanding of the respective subject matter can increase, as well as, through conversation, misunderstandings can be eliminated and entice interaction. Teachers encouraging this kind of collaborative learning can also benefit by understanding and also learning from their students. Thus, being able to assist and improve the learned materials and have a positive interaction with their students. Teachers, as the ones who encourage students to participate in conversations, must try to start it with interesting topics, like start it with a question. That way, students will be triggered to think and answer it. What makes a good conversation question is something that would catch the student's interest. Even though it is not really what the topic is all about. A good joke could really be effective, and then find a way to relate it to the main topic. In group work, the first work of students is to understand their own place in that culture, their terms and beliefs, and then to juxtapose that difference to the social knowledge of the classroom, which would involve groups in studying the content and forms of such knowledge. The teacher is the catalyst that helps the students follows the process. [6] Now the author will analyze the process of the interactive learning in groups.

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