

The Practice of Collaborative Learning among Lecturers in Malaysia

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Abstract: The research is conducted to examine whether lecturers at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Perlis practise collaborative learning in their classrooms. If they do, what kinds of activities are carried out with their students and the reasons they are being carried out. In order to get the data needed for the study, questionnaires were distributed to the lecturers randomly i.e. 10 lecturers for each faculty. These lecturers are asked to rate their preferences for practising collaborative learning in their teaching. Then, the reasons for collaborative learning practices chosen in classrooms are scrutinized. It is hoped that the findings from the study will provide empirical data or feedback on lecturers' preferences in teaching i.e. whether they like to ask their students to do group activities or not and also the types of activities done in groups with their students. By getting the information needed in the study, further steps can be taken in improving the lecturers' teaching styles to suit the needs of the students in their learning in this globalization era. At the same time, these lecturers will be made aware of the needs to equip themselves with efficient, up- to- date teaching methods and knowledge so that students will learn more and acquire the soft skills needed in team work which are essential nowadays.

Keywords: Team work; collaborative learning; cooperative learning; group work; lecturers

1. INTRODUCTION

¹ Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA , Malaysia.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

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Numerous studies have been carried out on collaborative learning and many have shown that when students were given the opportunity to work collaboratively, they were able to perform better (Ocker & Yaverbaum, 2001), use advance strategic thinking skills (Wentzel & Watkins, 2002) and gained many other benefits from it. These positive outcomes and benefits, however, could not have been achieved or obtained without careful management of collaborative classroom activities. It cannot be taken for granted that when students are asked to work together in groups, successful learning outcomes will be the end result of it.

There are many factors that teachers must consider before they decide to allow their students to work collaboratively. Davis (1993) emphasizes that there are some necessary measures that need to be taken to ensure successful learning of the students involved in it. Among these measures are appropriate strategies, the type of tasks assigned, group organization and the type of evaluation employed. Therefore, some teachers might be put off and opt not to adopt collaborative learning techniques in their classrooms due to this factor, and perhaps others. Loss control in the classroom, fear of the loss of content coverage and lack of teacher training in collaborative teaching methods are three of the examples why some teachers are reluctant to implement collaborative learning activities.

Thus, this paper investigates the preference of lecturers of a higher learning institution in Perlis, Malaysia, Universiti Teknologi MARA Perlis, toward collaborative classroom activities. The study aims to unveil the current classroom practices of these lecturers, specifically finding out whether these lecturers are using collaborative classroom activities when teaching their subject area, and if the answer is affirmative, what type(s) of collaborative activities do they employ. This is done by comparing the frequency of collaborative learning activities that they carried out with other types of activities, namely, whole class activities and individual activities. Furthermore, the reasons for collaborative learning practices chosen in classrooms are also scrutinized.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Collaboration can be defined as an activity of sharing ideas, writing and distributing work equally among team members to achieve success for a project (<http://commtechlab.msu.edu/sites/letsnet/noframes/bigideas/b2/b2theor.html>). It can be applied in teaching and learning process as it enables students to be actively involved in the process and when they do so, they can better understand certain concepts or retain knowledge in their long-term memory. Moreover, if students learn collaboratively, they will experience lively and successful learning process and teachers can produce students with strong academic performance (Brown, 2008).

This up-to-date collaborative learning has captured the interests of many researchers. Muhammad Kamarul Kabilan (2003) in his research on collaborative practices of Malaysian English Language teachers in an online forum finds that there exists an indication of collaborative efforts among the teachers in the attempt to enhance their professional development and learning. Another study done by M.Z. Kamsah & R. Talib (2003) to the lecturers and final year engineering students at Faculty of Chemical and Natural Resources Engineering (FKKSA) at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia Skudai reveals that both groups of lecturers (those who had served the university for more than 10 years and those who served less than five years) agreed on the importance of group work activities in classrooms. Both groups also agreed on the effectiveness of group work on cognitive skills. They agreed on the improvement of the understanding of materials through discussions, solving assignments and increasing memory retention and thinking skills. Moreover, a study done by Brown (2008) on collaborative learning in EAP classroom shows that most students agreed that collaborative learning helped them among others to comprehend better, enhance communication and problem-solving skills.

Using collaborative practices in the classroom may pose a challenge to teachers. This may lead to

their reluctance to use collaborative activities in the classroom for fear that they cannot control the class and they appear to have less authority in the classroom. Some teachers argue that if the class is noisy, this indicates that the students do not learn much and they lack discipline in the classroom. However, the proponents of collaborative learning believe that 'noise' inside the classroom indicates that students are actively learning. As long as teachers set the rules and standards to be monitored in the classroom activities at the beginning of the class, the 'noise' may convey positive learning is going on (Tinzmann, M.B. et al., 1990).

Another barrier to the use of collaborative activities in the classroom by teachers is that teachers are not well-prepared with this technique of teaching when they were at teachers' training colleges (Panitz & Panitz, n.d). When teachers were too familiar with lecture-style teaching in their teacher-training colleges, they may tend to adopt similar approach when teaching their students. In addition, they may not feel confident of switching from an 'expert mode' to a 'facilitator mode' during collaborative exercises in class. This lack of confidence may due to a fear that the students may think that they do not have enough knowledge about the subject when students start to ask questions during class discussions.

3. METHODOLOGY

The subjects of this study involved 30 lecturers from 6 faculties and two servicing departments in Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Perlis. The faculties are Sports and Recreation, Business Management, Accountancy, Information Technology and Quantitative Science and Engineering. While the servicing departments are Center for Islamic Thought and Understanding (CITU) and the Academy of Language Studies. All of the respondents have to be involved not only in teaching, but also other administrative work like invigilating, preparing examination questions, marking, finalizing students' marks, doing research, preparing manuals and writing reference books. These respondents have to be wise in dividing their time to complete their other work/activities besides teaching. They actually carry out these activities collaboratively. Therefore, the foundations of this study are these following research objectives:

- 1st. To examine university lecturers' preference for collaborative practices.
- 2nd. To identify the types of the collaborative practices.
- 3rd. To examine the reasons for collaboration.

A self-administered questionnaire was used as the instrument for collecting data to meet the needs of our purpose. The questionnaire consists of open-ended question and closed-ended questions which are divided into 4 sections. Section one consists of questions concerning of the general and demographic information. Section two deals with the respondents' views on implementing collaborative learning activities in their classrooms. Section three is on the reasons these respondents choose to avoid or choose to implement collaborative learning activities. Finally section four deals with the teaching-style analysis questionnaire. For the open-ended questions, the respondents have to specify their reasons for involving in collaborative practices. For the closed-ended questions, questions are ranked on a Likert Scale of (1) to (5). The respondents have to rank their preferences from (1) to (5) that indicates (1) for strongly agree and (5) for strongly disagree. Besides, they also have to tick (yes) or (no) to section three questions on their reasons of either to choose or avoid implementing collaborative activities in their classrooms. They are also given chances to state their reasons of why they do so. Descriptive statistics was used to analyze the respondents' responses.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 Demographic information

The first section of the questionnaire is on general and demographic information of the respondents. 29 of the respondents (29.97%) hold masters degree while one of them is a Phd. holder (3.33%). In terms of gender, 66.7% are female and 33.33% are male. Majority of the respondents are lecturers who hold masters degree (73.3%). 10% are associate professors and the remaining 16.7% are senior lecturers. 46.7% of the respondents teach Diploma level, 20% teach Degree level, 36.7% of them teach both Diploma and Degree levels. Only 3.3% of the respondents teach Diploma, Degree and Post Graduate levels. Regarding the age, we notice that majority of the respondents are between 30-39 years of age (50%). 26.7% are between 40-49 years old, 13.3% are 20-29 years old and 10% are 50 and above. The respondents have different years of teaching experience as well. Those who teach between 10-15 years have the highest percentage that is 26.7%, whereas those with 15-20 years of teaching experience and 5-9 years have the same percentage that is 16.7%. The same goes to those who have taught for less than 5 years and more than 20 years where they share the same percentage that is 20%. Overall, the respondents from the Business Management faculty have the highest number of respondents as compared to the other faculties.

4.2 Preference toward collaborative learning activities

The second section of the questionnaire measured the level of preference of respondents toward implementing collaborative learning activities in their teaching. The scores of 4 were awarded for Strongly Agree, 3 for Agree, 0 for Not Sure, 2 for Disagree and 1 for Strongly Disagree. The Not Sure responses had been considered as contributing no value (0) or inclination toward preference for implementing collaborative classroom activities. Therefore, the higher the score, the more positive preference the respondents had toward implementing collaborative learning activities in their classroom.

The maximum score obtained for this section would be 32 and the minimum would be 0. However, none of the respondents scored the maximum or the minimum. The highest score, 29, was obtained by two respondents. The scores 28, 27 and 25 were obtained by one respondent respectively. Five respondents scored 24, three respondents scored 23, five respondents scored 22, two respondents score 21 and one scored 20. There were eight respondents who scored less than 20. One respondent scored 19, one scored 17, one scored 16, two scored 15, one scored 14, and two scored the lowest, 12. From these, it was found that 25 respondents scored 16 and above (83.3%), and only five respondents scored less than that (16.7%). Thus, it can be concluded that most of the respondents prefer to implement collaborative learning activities in their teaching.

4.3 Reasons for implementing or not implementing collaborative learning activities

The third section of the questionnaire examined whether the respondents actually used collaborative activities in their teaching and the reasons for doing or not doing so. It was found that 21 of the respondents (70%) responded positively – *yes*, they did implement collaborative learning activities in their teaching. Only 9 (30%) gave a negative response. This indicates that a big number of the respondents did implement collaborative learning activities in their teaching.

Five reasons were listed for respondents to choose from if they answer *yes*, they did implement collaborative learning activities in their teaching. All of the 21 respondents agreed to the first reason that collaborative learning activities promote learners' academic progress. 18 respondents (85.7%) agreed

that collaborative learning activities improve learners' interaction skills. Meanwhile, 13 respondents (61.9%) agreed that collaborative learning activities encourage learners' intrinsic motivation. 15 (71.4%) respondents agreed that collaborative learning activities create a collaborative learning environment. For the last reason, that collaborative learning activities are appropriate for use with small groups, 14 respondents (66.7%) agreed to it.

On the whole, it can be concluded that the respondents who implemented collaborative learning activities in their teaching agreed that there are many positive outcomes of collaborative learning activities to students' learning.

Six reasons were listed for respondent who answered *no*, to back their practice of not implementing collaborative learning in their teaching. Out of the 9 (30%) respondents who claimed that they did not use collaborative learning activities in their teaching, two gave the reason that the students were not used to collaborative learning activities, and two claimed that the materials in textbooks were not proper for collaborative activities. Four claimed that large class size is an obstacle to use collaborative learning method. Two respondents claimed that it was difficult for them to assess learners' collaborative learning activities performance, and two respondents claimed that limited target language proficiency was the reason for not implementing collaborative learning activities, and four respondents claimed that they had very little knowledge of collaborative learning activities instruction.

The fourth section of the questionnaire analysed the teaching style and the types of activities that the respondents carried out during teaching. The activities were divided into three categories; whole class activities, individual activities and small group activities. Small group activities are activities that represent collaborative learning activities.

4.4 Whole Class Activities

Out of the eleven whole class activities, *lecture/teacher talk* is the one that most respondents carried out in the *very often* category (77.3%). The use of *overhead projector* (66.7%) and *white/blackboard* (63.3%) are the second and third *very often* activities respectively. These are followed by *teacher led whole class discussion* (26.7%), *question & answer* (20%) and the least is *watching a video/film* (6.7%).

Whole Class Activities	Very often	Often	Sometimes	Hardly ever	Never
Lecture/Teacher talk	77.3	23.3	3.3	-	-
Question & Answer	20.0	70.0	10.0	-	-
Demonstration	-	30.0	50.0	6.7	13.3
Watching a video/film	6.7	10.0	30.0	36.7	16.7
Notice board style displays	-	30.0	40.0	10.0	20.0
Overhead projector	66.7	13.3	13.3	6.7	-
White/blackboard	63.3	30.0	6.7	-	-
Teacher led whole class discussion	26.7	63.3	10.0	-	-
Free flowing whole class discussion	-	23.3	43.3	23.3	10.0
Visits	-	23.3	40.0	20.0	16.7
Dictation	-	20.0	33.3	23.3	23.3

In the *often* category, *question & answer* (70%) is the activity that most respondents carried out, followed by *teacher led whole class discussion* (63.3%). The rest of the activities were also carried out by the respondents in their teaching. All the eleven activities were *sometimes* carried out by all the respondents. In this category, *demonstration* (50%) is the highest, followed by *free flowing whole class discussion* (43.3%), *notice board style display* (40%), *visits* (40%) and *dictation* (33.3%). The rest of the

activities were, *overhead projector* (13.3%), *watching a video/film* (30%), *question & answer* (10%), *teacher led whole class discussion* (10%). *Use of white/blackboard* (3.3%) and *lecture/teacher talk* (3.3%) were the least carried out activities in this category.

The activity that most respondents *hardly ever* carried out was *watching a video/film* (36.7%). This is followed by *free flowing whole class discussion* (23.4%), *dictation* (23.4%), *visits* (20%), *notice board style displays* (10%), *demonstration* (6.7%) and *overhead projector* (6.7%). In the *never* category, *dictation* (23.3%) appears to be the activity that most respondents did not implement in their teaching. This is followed by *notice board style displays* (20%), *watching a video/film* (16.7%), *visits* (16.7%), *demonstration* (13.3%), and *free flowing whole class discussion* (10%).

4.5 Individual Activities

As for individual activities, individual assignments had the highest percentage (46.7%) in the very often category. This was followed by worksheets or other individual work (43.3%) and homework/private study (36.7%), and question & answer (36.7%). Regular tests (33.3%) was the fifth highest, followed by use of the Internet/WWW, etc.(26.7%), and textbooks/journals, etc. (13.3%). The lowest were library research/information seeking (3.3%) and one-to-one teaching (3.3%).

In the often category, question and answer (56.7%) had the highest percentage, and this is followed by regular tests (50%), and homework/private study (46.7%) and reading textbooks and journals, etc. (46.7%). Three activities shared the same percentage (36.7%) and they are essay writing, individual assignments and library research/information seeking. The last three activities were use of the Internet/WWW, etc. (26.7%), one-to-one teaching (23.3%), and student personal choice in an assignment (13.3%).

Individual Activities	Very often	Often	Sometimes	Hardly ever	Never
Essay writing	-	36.7	30.0	6.7	26.7
Worksheets or other individual work	43.3	43.3	13.3	-	-
Homework/private study	36.7	46.7	10.0	3.3	3.3
Individual assignments	46.7	36.7	16.7	-	-
Student personal choice in an assignment	-	13.3	66.7	-	20.0
Regular tests	33.3	50.0	16.7	-	-
Library research/information seeking	3.3	36.7	53.3	6.7	-
One-to-one teaching	3.3	23.3	53.3	10.0	10.0
Question and answer	36.7	56.7	6.7	-	-
Reading textbooks/journals, etc.	13.3	46.7	36.7	3.3	-
Use of the Internet/WWW, etc.	26.7	26.7	30.0	-	-

Student personal choice in an assignment (66.7%) had the highest percentage in the sometimes category. The second highest was library research (53.3%) and one-to-one teaching (53.3%). These were followed by reading textbooks, journals, etc.(36.7%), essay writing (30%), regular tests (16.7%), worksheets or other individual work (13.3%), homework or private study (10%). The lowest percentage was for question and answer (6.7%).

In the hardly ever category, there were only four activities involved; one-to-one teaching (10%), essay

writing (6.7%), library research/information seeking (6.7%), and reading books/journals, etc. (3.3%). As for the never category, four activities were also involved; essay writing (26.7%), student personal choice in an assignment (20%), one-to-one teaching (10%), and homework/private study (3.3%). From the result in Table 2, it is evident that the respondents carried out most of the individual activities in the list.

4.6 Small Group Activities

As for small group activities, student presentation in group (33.3%) is the highest in the very often category. This is followed by student presentation individually (23.3%), small group assignment (16.7%), practical (16.7%) and small group discussion (13.3%). Games (10%), student led discussion (10%), case studies (6.7%) and buzz group (3.3%) were the four activities that had the last four lowest percentages.

In the often category, small group assignment (53.3%) was the highest. Small group discussion (50%), and student led discussion (46.7%) and student presentation in group (46.7%) came second and third. These were followed by student presentation individually (36.7%), case studies (33.3%) and buzz group (30%). Small group role play and guided discovery or what's your theory had the same percentage (26.7%). The last six activities in this category were large group role play (23.3%), games (20%), practical (20%), debate (6.7%), card games (6.7%), and drama (6.7%), where the last three had the same percentage.

Guided discovery or what's your theory (46.7%) had the highest percentage in the sometimes category. This was followed by buzz group (40%), debate (36.7%), small group discussion (33.3%), small group role play (33.3%) and student led discussion (30%). Small group assignment, case studies and practical shared the same percentage (26.7%). The rest were student presentation individually (23.3%), large group role play (20%), student presentation in group (20%), card games (23.3%), games (20%) and drama (16.7%).

As for the hardly ever category, large group role play, drama, debate, games, card games were the activities that had the highest percentage (23.3%). Small group role play (16.7%), student presentation individually (16.7%), drama (10%), case studies (10%), practical (10%), buzz group (6.7%) and guided discovery or what's your theory (6.7%) followed.

Out of all the small group activities, drama (53.3%) seemed to be the least popular. It was followed by card games (46.7) and large group role play (33.3%) and debate (33.3%). Games (26.7) and practical (26.7%) were the fifth and sixth least carried out by the respondents. These were followed by case studies (23.3%), buzz group (20%), small group role play (20%) and guided discovery or what's your theory (20%). The last three activities were small group discussion, student led discussion and small group assignment which had 3.3% respectively.

On the whole, it can be concluded that the respondents carried out all the activities listed under the three categories; *whole class activities*, *individual activities* and *small group activities*. This evidently indicates that the respondent did in fact practise collaborative learning with their students, even though some of them (n=9, 30%) claimed that they did not practise it. However, a further scrutiny of the three groups of activities; whole class activities, individual activities and small group activities, it is evident that respondents' responses for the *hardly ever* and *never* categories were highest for small group activities. This indicates that out of the three groups of activities, the respondents implemented *whole class* and *individual activities* more than small group activities. Therefore, from this, it can be concluded that even though the respondents implemented all three group of activities, they implemented *whole class* and *individual activities* more than *small group activities*, which represent collaborative learning activities. A possible reason for this is perhaps they were not very clear with the meaning or concept of collaborative learning. In other words, other types of classroom activities dominated their classroom more than collaborative learning activities.

Another interesting conclusion that can be made from the findings is that many of the respondents appeared to have made an attempt to incorporate collaborative learning activities along with other types

of classroom activities in their teaching. This is proven by analyzing the all the activities that fell in the *never* category, whereby it is clear that less than 50% of the respondents were involved, except for only one activity, which was *drama* (53.3%).

Small Group Activities	Very often	Often	Sometimes	Hardly ever	Never
Buzz group	3.3	30	40	6.7	20
Small group discussion	13.3	50	33.3	-	3.3
Small group role play	-	26.7	33.3	16.7	20
Large group role play	-	23.3	20	23.3	33.3
Drama	-	6.7	16.7	23.3	53.3
Student led discussion	10	46.7	30	10	3.3
Debate	-	6.7	36.7	23.3	33.3
Student presentation in group	33.3	46.7	20	-	-
Student presentation individually	23.3	36.7	23.3	16.7	-
Small group assignment	16.7	53.3	26.7	-	3.3
Guided discovery or what's your theory	-	26.7	46.7	6.7	20
Games	10	20	20	23.3	26.7
Card games	-	6.7	23.3	23.3	46.7
Case studies	6.7	33.3	26.7	10	23.3
Practical	16.7	20	26.7	10	26.7

5. CONCLUSION

This study has found that majority of the respondents prefer to implement collaborative learning activities in their teaching. They believe that collaborative learning activities done in class promote learners' academic progress, interaction skills as well as encourage learners' intrinsic motivation. These activities include whole class activities, individual activities and social group activities. Students will be engaged more in their learning if they are given opportunities to be involved in activities carried out in class. There is one Chinese proverb that proves this. Tell me and I forget, show me and I may remember, involve me and I will understand (http://hubpages.com/hub/chinese_proverbs). However, a small number of respondents are reluctant to implement collaborative learning activities in class since students are not used to collaborative learning activities. Besides, a large number of students in a class also prevent respondents from implementing collaborative learning activities because they have a tight schedule to finish the syllabus. To summarize, collaborative learning activities give lots of benefits to students in the long run because the students can improve their social skills as well as they can be creative and critical in their thinking. Despite having difficulties in terms of class size and time constraint, lecturers should implement collaborative learning activities in class for the benefits of their students.

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