Cooperative Learning in a Multi-Cultural Classroom

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Introduction
During my first year of teaching I realized that in addition to the normal groupings that occur in any high school, the wide range of cultures represented in the student body at Annandale High School created extra tensions and kept students from interrelating as well as I wanted within the classroom. Since creating a climate for learning is such an integral part of the learning/teaching process, and since I believe that a crucial element of that learning climate evolves around students being comfortable with each other and with the teacher, I decided to introduce a cooperative learning experience as my research project during my second year of teaching.

Objective
For this project I decided to explore whether students would learn the vocabulary and grammatical material as well or better in a cooperative learning experience as they did with the more traditional style of teaching.

Method
I chose a second year Spanish class for the project and worked with an ESL teacher in our building who presented the same experience using English rather than Spanish as the language for the project. We met 3 or 4 times to plan and evaluate the process of the project. We chose a Unit that dealt with sports and sports terminology. Students were to work in groups to plan and present an ESPN style sports cast that included scores from a variety of sports and an interview with an athlete. The presentation was to last three to five minutes with each member of the team having equal speaking parts. The students were instructed to use as much of the vocabulary as possible from the Unit which dealt with sports activities. They were also instructed to use the past tense correctly, which was one of the major grammatical presentations in that Unit. The presentation was to be typed and turned in to me before their presentation.

We provided students with resources from sports magazines (in both English and Spanish) and biographical material on several well-known sports figures (in English only). Students met in their groups a total of six times before their presentation to plan and to practice. Most of those meeting times were limited to 20 to 30 minutes. Some students indicated that a longer period at the beginning when they were deciding on the subject of the interview and at the end when they were practicing for their presentation would have helped them. Since we have block scheduling with 90-minute periods that suggestion is feasible for next year’s plans.
I divided the classroom into six groups. Students were assigned groups based on second quarter grades so that there was a fairly even distribution of grade groups in each small cooperative learning group. Since one of my goals was to increase students' comfort levels when interacting with each other, I focused on small group process skills during the learning experience. Students were given written and oral examples of group process skills and given an opportunity to practice those skills each time the group met, through assignment of small group tasks and through a short group evaluation at the end of each planning session. Records of these task assignments and group evaluations were turned in to me when they did their presentation. To keep students on task they were also given a sheet to fill out that included decisions, task assignments and deadlines as they progressed through the planning process. This sheet was also turned in to me on the day of their presentation.

Findings

The evaluation process included both group and individual points. Groups were given points based on the accuracy of vocabulary and grammar, the way the group worked together in planning the presentation and the overall presentation in terms of being convincing as a sports cast. Individuals were given points based on their fluency in presentation, accuracy of vocabulary and grammar, how well they played their part as a sportscaster or an athlete, and the quality of their involvement in the small group during the planning process. There was disparity between the presentations. One group did an excellent job, four did good jobs and one group did a poor job in their presentation. This last group simply didn’t prepare well. Their grammar work wasn’t adequate and they lacked the willingness to take on the roles of the sports casters and interviewee seriously.

Overall the students learned the material as well using the cooperative learning experience as they would have using the more traditional method: presentation of material by the teacher, the implementation of exercises in class and at home, and a quiz covering the material. I based that assessment on their presentation scores and their scores on the final Unit exam. Some students indicated that they would also have liked to have a quiz over the vocabulary, which showed some of the discomfort they had with a non-traditional approach to evaluation. I believe that discomfort would gradually disappear the more they had the opportunity to learn vocabulary through use in a cooperative learning project.

I gave the students an evaluation form asking them to compare the cooperative teaching/learning style with the traditional style in terms of 1) learning the material, 2) enjoying the learning process, 3) having the opportunity to use their Spanish skills, and 4) getting to know the other students in the class. An overwhelming majority said they preferred the cooperative learning style. The one negative aspect had to do with the way the experience was set up. I failed to make it clear that each person in the group was responsible for writing his or her own part of the presentation using the group as a sounding board after they had written their
Several of the groups chose the most proficient person to do most of
the writing. Next year I will make that instruction clearer.

Reflections
The majority of students also indicated that the smaller group enabled
them to use their Spanish skills more than in the traditional setting. That was
particularly evident with the quieter students who were proficient in Spanish and
were pushed to participate more in the smaller group since they were needed to
help plan the project.

All the students indicated that they had become better acquainted with the
other students in their group. I can also attest to that as I observed those group
relationships being used in other settings. Several times during the Unit, when I
asked students to form themselves into groups in order to do learning activities
other than the cooperative project, they simply moved into their project groups.
They also began to relate to others in their project groups before class and
during other study situations.

I also asked the students whether they felt more competent in using small
group process skills after the project. Several indicated that they had never had
an opportunity to learn some basic small group skills and that they appreciated
being introduced to those skills. Those who already had some basic small group
skills indicated that the opportunity to practice those in the Spanish classroom
was a good experience in applying them in a different setting.

Conclusion
I was pleased with the student improvement as a result of their
cooperative learning experiences in the classroom. I believe the students were
able to learn the vocabulary and grammatical material in a setting that enhanced
the learning climate in the classroom and provided them with the additional
knowledge and practice of skills needed in working in small groups. But more
than that, I felt that the cooperative learning experiences allowed them to gain
valuable experience working in groups. I plan to present the Unit again next year
to my Spanish 2 classes and to introduce similar experiences to my level 1 and
level 3 classes.