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UTILIZING COLLABORATIVE LEARNING TO ENHANCE MOTIVATION, FOSTER INCLUSIVITY AND SUPPORT WELL-BEING IN LSP

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Abstract

In the evolving landscape of Foreign Language Teaching, inclusivity is paramount, also in Language for Specific Purposes (LSP). Departing from traditional approaches, educators emphasize dynamic learning environments where students actively engage with tailored content. Collaborative learning, rooted in constructivist principles, serves as a cornerstone for effective language acquisition within specialized contexts. This article explores the theoretical framework of collaborative learning and its application in LSP, presenting a case study to illustrate its impact on student well-being and learning outcomes. The study employs a mixed-methods approach to provide a comprehensive understanding of student experiences and perceptions. Results indicate a positive correlation between collaborative learning practices and student engagement, motivation, and sense of community. Proactive measures are discussed to address challenges such as student stress during presentations, emphasizing ongoing reflection and adaptation in pedagogical practices. Overall, the findings highlight the transformative potential of collaborative learning in promoting inclusive education and enhancing student outcomes within specialized language contexts.

Keywords

collaborative learning, language for specific purposes, inclusivity, motivation, well-being

Introduction

In the dynamic field of Foreign Language Teaching (FLT), the importance of inclusivity is underscored. Inclusivity in education extends far beyond addressing the needs of learners with Special Educational Needs. These needs interact with environmental and attitudinal barriers, emphasizing the need for an inclusive approach that values and supports all learners in their unique contexts. Departing from traditional approaches, educators are now dedicated to crafting interactive learning environments where students are deeply engaged with language and course content that is tailored to their individual interests and learning needs. This departure challenges the conventional text-based model, which has been criticized for its limitations in fostering meaningful interaction and connection with diverse student experiences. At the same time, the integration of soft skills, such as teamwork, adaptability, and effective communication, is prioritized, preparing students not only for academic success but also for real-world applications (see e.g. Kováč, 2024; Šulovská 2024). Instead, the focus shifts towards an educational framework that values transformative learning experiences, promoting critical thinking and personal growth. In this context, educators strive to cultivate a positive and inclusive atmosphere where students feel empowered to participate actively in their language acquisition journey. Teachers adopt the role of mentors, guiding students through collaborative learning experiences that encourage exploration and engagement with the material. This reciprocal relationship between teachers and students serves as a cornerstone for effective language acquisition, particularly within specialized contexts.

1 Understanding the Theoretical Framework

The terms *peer learning*, *collaborative learning*, and *group work* are often used interchangeably, but scholars in the field of teaching and learning stress the importance of distinguishing between them. *Collaborative learning* occurs when students work together as equals to solve problems, discuss ideas, and create products. In contrast, *peer learning* involves pairing students with different knowledge or abilities, allowing one to lead while the other learns. The discourse surrounding peer learning involves various terms, including peer(-led) instruction, peer-academic learning, peer-to-peer learning, peer-assisted learning, peer mentoring, peer tutoring, learning communities, transition mentoring, cooperative learning, structured mutual peer interactions, peer support, and peer review activities. For more detailed information and sources, see Pleschová and McAlpine (2024). Peer

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learning encompasses various activities such as one-to-one learning partnerships, pair work, group projects, and student-led sessions. While some perspectives consider both collaborative and peer learning as instances where students engage in mutual teaching and learning, alternative viewpoints argue that peer learning encompasses a range of collaborative activities, including peer instruction or peer work. Based on this discussion, the term peer learning could be used in this article. However, collaborative learning is preferred, as explained in the earlier division of terminology.

Collaborative learning, rooted in the constructivist literature and influenced by Piaget and Vygotsky, emphasizes interaction among students, fostering cognitive growth through exposure to diverse perspectives and cognitive conflict. Piaget (1950) recognized the impact of the learning environment on student development, noting that interaction among students fosters intellectual diversity and enhances learning. Vygotsky (1978) further posited that an individual's development is best understood within their social context, emphasizing the co-construction of knowledge among students. Subsequently, Goodsell et al. (1992, 11) defined collaborative learning as

> "*an umbrella term for a variety of educational approaches involving joint intellectual effort by students, or students and teachers together. Usually, students are working in groups of two or more, mutually searching for understanding, solutions, or meanings, or creating a product. Collaborative learning activities vary widely, but most centre on students' exploration or application of the course material, not simply the teacher's presentation or explication of it.*"

The core principles of collaborative learning in the classroom, as delineated by Jacobs et al. (2002) and referenced in Salma (2020), include valuing cooperation, utilizing heterogeneous grouping, fostering positive interdependence, ensuring individual accountability, facilitating simultaneous interaction, promoting equal participation, developing collaborative skills, and allowing for group autonomy. It is important to add, that while collaboration and cooperation share similarities, they differ in their implementation. In cooperative learning, each learner is assigned a specific part of the task, whereas collaborative learning involves learners working together in groups on the same task to collectively seek understanding (ibid.).

Many scholars view learning as an active and constructive process, emphasizing the necessity for students to engage purposefully with new information and integrate it with existing knowledge (Goodsell, 1992). In collaborative learning environments, students are not passive recipients of knowledge but actively participate in creating new understanding. Activities such as group projects and peer learning initiatives offer meaningful engagement with course material, bridging theory and practice effectively. This approach fosters critical thinking, self-reflection, and collaboration skills, empowering students to take ownership of their learning journey. Collaborative learning promotes interdependence and mutual learning, with students often turning to peers for assistance, facilitating the exchange of information and making learning enjoyable.

Many language teachers have long incorporated collaborative learning into their classrooms, recognizing its value in fostering communication, peer interaction, and deeper engagement with language tasks. Pair and group work, as instances of collaborative learning, offer numerous advantages for students in language and LSP classes. Firstly, they provide increased speaking time, allowing learners to engage more actively with the language. By shifting the spotlight from the teacher to the students, pair and group work encourage interaction among peers and promote a sense of inclusivity within the classroom. Moreover, collaborating with others enables students to experience a sense of achievement when collectively reaching team goals, fostering a positive learning environment. These activities also teach important leadership and teamwork skills, preparing students for real-world interactions beyond the classroom. Additionally, pair and group work help vary the pace of the lesson, keeping students more engaged and motivated. Lastly, these activities allow instructors to effectively monitor students' language production while moving around the classroom, facilitating targeted feedback and support. Overall, incorporating pair and group work into language and LSP classes can greatly enhance students' learning experience and promote valuable skills development.

1.1 Collaborative Learning in Tertiary Education

Collaborative learning has garnered significant attention in recent research for its positive impact on students' academic motivation across diverse educational settings, with peer learning playing a crucial role. Scholars argue that students' social interactions enhance motivation and academic achievement, aligning with Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (Wentzel, 1999; Cicuto & Torres, 2016 as cited in Loes, 2022). Positioned within this framework, active engagement in learning is hypothesized to heighten motivation (Cicuto & Torres, 2016).

Academic motivation, driven by intrinsic and extrinsic factors, plays a pivotal role in student success, with collaborative learning activities contributing to its maintenance and enhancement (Ambrose et al., 2010). The

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literature underscores a notable absence of direct investigations into the correlation between collaborative learning and changes in academic motivation, despite the widespread adoption of such strategies in higher education, prompting a call for further research to explore this relationship across diverse student populations and institutions (Loes, 2022). Collaborative learning diverges from traditional lecture-based instruction by engaging students actively in their learning process, a method widely acclaimed for its effectiveness in promoting student engagement and motivation (Johnson et al., 2014).

Successful implementation of collaborative learning requires clear explanation of activities, effective time management, and a well-defined follow-up plan to reinforce learning outcomes. The core principles of collaborative learning in the classroom, as delineated by Jacobs et al. (2002), include valuing cooperation, utilizing heterogeneous grouping, fostering positive interdependence, ensuring individual accountability, facilitating simultaneous interaction, promoting equal participation, developing collaborative skills, and allowing for group autonomy.

Collaborative learning serves as a powerful tool for fostering inclusivity within classrooms. By encouraging students to work together towards common goals, collaborative learning breaks down barriers and creates a supportive environment where every voice is valued. Through group projects, peer learning initiatives, and interactive discussions, students have the opportunity to engage with course material in a meaningful way, regardless of their background or level of expertise. This inclusive approach allows students to learn from each other's diverse perspectives, experiences, and knowledge, enriching the learning experience for everyone involved. Additionally, collaborative learning promotes active participation and equal opportunities for all students to contribute, ensuring that no one is left behind. Overall, collaborative learning not only enhances academic outcomes but also fosters a sense of belonging and community within the classroom, making it a cornerstone of inclusive education. In employing collaborative learning in LSP classes as a method to explore its impact on participants' well-being, the approach focused on creating a supportive and inclusive environment where students could actively engage with course material.

Collaborative learning in higher education, recognized for its role in fostering inclusivity and critical thinking skills, is advocated as a method for lifelong learning (Boud et al., 2013; Smith & Hatton, 1993; Candy et al., 1994). Collaborative learning activities are perceived as catalysts for enhancing critical thinking, teamwork, and communication skills, as demonstrated in projects like the e-research project, which encouraged collaborative exploration and presentation of findings (Johnson et al., 2014). In their study, Štefková et al. (2023, 46) discovered that 22% of students identified group tasks as the most favoured tasks in the course, with only Kahoot surpassing them in popularity.

To sum up, drawing on social constructivist theory, collaborative learning is seen as a mechanism for shaping students' motivation through social interactions and group dynamics. Psychologists emphasize the importance of engaging intrinsic motivation to promote long-term knowledge retention, while educational researchers advocate for active, meaningful learning experiences to combat disinterest and weak motivation in traditional educational settings (Straková, 2016; Hincová, 2015).

2 Case Study

By encouraging collaboration through group projects, peer learning initiatives, and interactive discussions, the aim was to foster a sense of belonging and community within the classroom. Through these collaborative activities, participants had the opportunity to not only enhance their academic skills but also to develop social connections and support networks, which are essential components of well-being. By facilitating meaningful interactions and shared learning experiences, collaborative learning served as a catalyst for promoting positive emotional states, reducing stress levels, and enhancing overall psychological well-being among participants. Through this approach, the study aimed to uncover the ways in which collaborative learning contributes to the holistic development and well-being of individuals within educational settings.

2.1 The Course

The *English for Specific Purposes 1* course, conducted during the winter term of 2023/2024, was selected as the focus of the study, comprising a group of 14 students of biology and medical biology. Drawing on insights gained from the *Inclusive Teaching: A Professional Development Course* offered by Central European University, Masaryk University, Nottingham Trent University, University of Madeira, and Comenius University Bratislava, the objective was to enhance the learning experience and outcomes for biology students.

This specialized course is tailored for biology students aiming to augment their English language proficiency and refine their scientific communication skills. Its curriculum is meticulously designed to develop specialized

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vocabulary, enhance written and spoken communication for scientific discourse, practice presentation skills, and foster cultural sensitivity in scientific interactions. Throughout the course, participants engage in rigorous training to acquire the language and communication competencies necessary for success in academic studies, research presentations, and professional engagements within the field of biology. The course aims to expand students' biology-related vocabulary, improve their ability to express scientific ideas clearly and effectively in both written assignments and spoken communication, teach them how to deliver engaging and informative scientific presentations, enhance their capacity to actively participate in group discussions and collaborations related to their scientific studies, and raise awareness of cultural differences in scientific communication to enable them to adapt their communication style when working with peers from diverse backgrounds.

Central to the approach of the *English for Specific Purposes 1* course was the recognition of students as active participants in their learning journey. Thus, in the course, students are regarded as *social agents* (as defined in Companion Volume of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages), emphasizing their active role in learning and interaction. All activities are tailored to focus on their individual skills, knowledge, and interests, encompassing personal competencies, motivations, language abilities, learning preferences, and personal contexts. This approach encourages students to engage meaningfully, leveraging their unique perspectives and abilities to contribute to collaborative tasks and real-world challenges (more about the concept and its implementation can be found here: Fischer, 2021; Fischer & Wolder, 2021; Fischer & Wolder, 2022). Students were empowered to choose their preferred examination mode, oral or written, avoiding rigid assessment formats to accommodate diverse learning styles and instil a sense of ownership. Additionally, students were given control over topic selection for summaries and presentations (see below), allowing exploration of biology through personal interests, enhancing the connection to the material, and fostering intrinsic motivation.

Amid challenges, various strategies emerged to foster inclusive classroom dynamics. Implementing collaborative learning activities like group projects and peer learning initiatives provided meaningful engagement with course material. Real-world examples bridged theory and practice, making learning more relevant and engaging. Peer learning activities, replacing traditional article reading with collaborative e-research projects, further promoted inclusivity. In addition, students were presented with task-based and scenario-based assignments, with the primary focus on pair and group activities. While the textbook by Cihová et al. (2018) remained a foundational resource, given the group's proficiency level at C1, many articles were omitted and replaced with e-research projects. Topics such as cloning, genetics, vitamins, and medical ethics proved to be particularly effective for this approach, offering rich, interdisciplinary content that engaged students and encouraged critical thinking and active participation. Students were tasked with gathering information from various sources, including scientific articles, to create and present outcomes tailored to the assignment, such as abstracts for conferences, preparing for discussions, presenting at scientific conferences, or mediating conflicts between two groups.

The integration of real-world examples into the curriculum helped bridge the gap between theoretical concepts and practical application. This approach not only enhanced the relevance of the course material but also stimulated critical thinking and problem-solving skills among students. By exploring how scientific principles are applied in real-life scenarios, students gained a deeper understanding of the subject matter and its significance in the broader context.

The modification to enhance inclusivity also included allowing students to select assessment topics within the broader field of biology, accommodating their varied interests. This maintained consistency across course sections while fostering inclusivity and accessibility. While striving for inclusivity, challenges may arise in fully addressing diverse needs and preferences, and students may choose highly specialized topics beyond the instructor's expertise. However, these challenges present opportunities for collaborative learning, enriching the course experience for all participants.

The assignments for the course included:

I Summary: Students were required to submit a summary of a TED talk related to biology of their choosing.

II Presentation: Students were required to deliver their presentations on biology-related topics of their choice.

This autonomy-driven approach aimed to celebrate individual differences, aligning with literature on inclusive teaching that values diverse backgrounds and preferences (Barkley et al., 2005; Ambrose et al., 2010; Chick et al., 2012). It also echoes the empowering vision of learners outlined by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), emphasizing learner engagement and autonomy in the learning process (CEFR, 2020). Scenario-based assessment was incorporated into the evaluation process, where students prepared a

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conference-style abstract and presentation. This approach aimed to simulate real-world professional contexts, enhancing their practical communication skills and deepening their understanding of course material. This approach was part of a broader implementation of scenario-based activities throughout the entire course, immersing students in real-world professional contexts to enhance their practical communication skills and deepen their understanding of course material.

3 Measuring Impact

Assessing the impact of inclusive teaching practices on student learning and well-being emerged as a crucial aspect. To gain a comprehensive understanding, a mixed-methods approach was employed, combining quantitative data from surveys with qualitative insights from interviews and classroom observations.

3.1 Methodology

The primary data-gathering tool chosen for this study was a questionnaire, administered during the penultimate lesson of the course (December 2023). Following data collection, thorough analysis was conducted. To complement the quantitative data from the questionnaire, the final lesson included an interview section. During these interviews, areas that may not have been sufficiently clear from the questionnaire were explored. It is important to note that student participation in the interviews was voluntary and open, and any responses provided were diligently recorded to ensure a comprehensive understanding of student perspectives.

This mixed-methods approach aimed to capture both quantitative insights from the questionnaire and qualitative nuances from the interviews, providing a holistic view of students' experiences and feedback.

3.2 Results

Reflecting on the journey of inclusive and collaborative teaching, a mixed-methods approach provided a comprehensive understanding of student experiences and perceptions. Quantitative data from surveys revealed promising outcomes, with a high percentage of students expressing satisfaction with the course workload, quality of interactions, and overall learning experience. Moreover, qualitative insights underscored the positive impact of collaborative teaching practices, with students reporting increased engagement, motivation, and a sense of belonging in the classroom.

The questionnaire, administered during the penultimate lesson of the term, assessed various aspects of the ESP 1 course, including overall well-being and student perceptions of class dynamics. Findings indicated a high overall well-being score of 4.67 (out of 5), despite some students expressing stress during presentations, particularly introverted individuals (further discussed in Discussion).

Results from the Likert scale questions provided insights into the sense of community, workload management, communication with instructors, inclusivity, and the impact of feedback on learning and well-being. The class successfully fostered a strong sense of community and connection among students. This assertion garnered substantial agreement, with as many as 50% indicating a strong endorsement by selecting "strongly agree". Similar positive outcomes were observed for the statement "Collaborative activities or group work significantly contributed to my overall sense of well-being in the class," with as many as 58% of students strongly agreeing with this assertion. Interactive and group activities were identified as the most valued aspect of the course, with seven occurrences.

Feedback on the teacher's interaction, workload, communication, inclusivity, and feedback on assignments was overwhelmingly positive. Students praised well-prepared classes and the teacher's friendly atmosphere, emphasizing the value of engaging lessons. The class successfully fostered a strong sense of community and connection among students.

Further insights emerged from responses to open-ended questions. Students lauded the teaching process, study materials, and assessment of the teacher's work, highlighting thorough preparation, efficient use of time, and a non-graded feel within the teaching system. Additionally, students provided suggestions for improvement, including working in smaller groups for organization and more even more interactive exercises for engagement. They expressed a highly favourable view of the teaching process, citing "*well-prepared classes that incorporated numerous diverse activities, ultimately enhancing the overall enjoyment of the course*". The topics covered were deemed "*interesting and easy to comprehend*", facilitating the acquisition of new vocabulary and theoretical understanding. One student highlighted the teacher's "*really natural use of the foreign language*". A different student appreciated the "*carefully prepared exercises, which contributed to smooth, enjoyable, and engaging lessons*".

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Feedback on assignments was highly valued, with 75% strongly agreeing with the statement "*The feedback given on my assignments played a significant role in enhancing both my learning and well-being*." Again, students praised well-prepared classes and the friendly atmosphere created by the instructor. They hoped for continuity in future classes and appreciated engaging lessons.

Overall, students appreciated the instructor's energy, carefully prepared exercises, and interactive lessons, contributing to a smooth, enjoyable, and engaging learning experience. One student lauded the teaching process, stating it was highly positive, with "*well-prepared classes featuring diverse activities that made the course enjoyable*".

4 Discussion

The outcomes of the study are congruent with the findings of Kšiňanová et al. (2024), where students of the Faculty of Medicine of the Comenius University Bratislava also highly valued opportunities for real contact with classmates, regular communication, mutual support, and inspiration. Departing from traditional instructional methods and engaging in pair or small group work was appreciated, emphasizing the study of scientific texts, extracting information, and preparing presentations. Similarly, the main focus of their research project was to create presentations in the English language by students that would meet the rigorous standards set at scientific medical conferences.

One of the lessons was observed by a colleague to gather constructive feedback and an external perspective on the teaching methods and student engagement. The observer noted that different students were recording distinct pieces of information, suggesting potential variations in learning outcomes. However, it was pointed out that students would ultimately present their understanding of the topic orally, as part of the exam. Additionally, emphasis was placed on the fact that while students could read the original article in the textbook for reference outside of the classroom, arranging interaction and communication in English outside the classroom setting might not be as straightforward.

One notable challenge encountered was the prevalence of student stress during presentations, particularly among introverted individuals. For the instructor, it was imperative to acknowledge and address these challenges, fostering a supportive environment where all students feel comfortable and valued. Proactive measures were taken to address this issue by implementing supportive measures within the classroom environment. This included providing resources on public speaking tips and strategies for managing presentation anxiety to the entire class rather than individually. Additionally, peer support among students was encouraged, allowing them to offer assistance and encouragement to one another in preparing for presentations.

These adjustments aimed to create a supportive atmosphere and empower all students to participate in presentations with confidence while minimizing stress and anxiety. Students were given the choice to opt out of the presentations; however, considering the essential nature of presentation skills as highlighted in documents such as the CEFR and the national curriculum, these skills were emphasized as a crucial component of the course. Instead, the classroom was gradually transformed into a community with a supportive atmosphere week by week.

This study involved only 14 students in a single group, which limits the generalizability of the findings. However, there are plans to extend the study to include more groups, with more detailed findings to be shared in future research.

Conclusion

A considerable body of literature underscores the positive impact of collaborative learning activities on various student outcomes, including increased persistence in university, academic achievement, critical thinking skills, need for cognition, improved attitudes towards instructors and self-esteem, enhanced social interdependence and peer support, and greater openness to diversity. As highlighted by Kostrub (2022), the constructionist teacher facilitates and guides conversations among learners, fostering thinking and activity within the classroom. Furthermore, Kostrub (2022) emphasizes the collaborative nature of constructionist teaching, likening students to equal partners in their learning journey, driven by shared goals and objectives.

Reflecting on the journey of inclusive teaching and collaborative learning reveals several key insights. Firstly, the importance of student agency and autonomy cannot be overstated. Empowering students to take ownership of their learning contributes significantly to creating an inclusive and empowering educational environment. Secondly, fostering inclusivity requires ongoing reflection and adaptation. It is imperative for instructors to continually assess and refine their practices to meet the evolving needs of their students. Kordíková (2022) also stresses the

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importance of encouraging university instructors to reassess their approach to teaching, progressively integrating activating methodologies into the instruction of specialized subjects.

Drawing from the insights derived from the examination of inclusive teaching and collaborative learning methodologies, particularly within the framework of the discussed course, it becomes apparent that leveraging activating techniques in pedagogy offers significant benefits and motivation for both educators and learners. Overall, the combination of collaborative learning activities, real-world examples, and task-based assignments created a dynamic and inclusive learning environment where students were actively engaged, supported, and empowered to achieve their academic goals. Through these initiatives, the *English for Specific Purposes 1* course successfully cultivated a community of learners who not only acquired language proficiency but also developed essential competencies for success in the field of biology and beyond.

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