

Case Study Project: Problem Posing Education: Promoting Interaction through Cooperative
Learning and Communicative Language Teaching

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Abstract

This ethnographic study investigates how interaction with others, paired with Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis provide an optimal learning environment for students learning a second language in the classroom. The subject of this case study, Joe, is a student who has immigrated from the Philippines with his family during his early teenage years to the United States. The way that Joe interacts effectively with his fellow peers and teachers utilizing the language he has learned through his ESL program has depicted a valuable and successful ESL program, and I believe these successes can be explained through the frameworks of problem posing education, cooperative learning, and the sociocultural learning theory. This paper is divided into four parts. The first part explores the ideas of interaction along with Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis and the Communicative Language Teaching theory, and introduces Kevin's language proficiency as well as the school site's demographic information. Secondly, I will explain the methods used to acquire the data. Thirdly, I will analyze the collected data and offer possible recommendations that could be implemented into the site's ESL curriculum, and also for Joe. Finally, the paper concludes with a reflection of the case study experience.

Cooperative Learning and Scaffolding in an Optimal Environment

“Liberating education consists in acts of cognition, not transferrals of information. It is a learning situation in which the cognizable object (far from being the end of the cognitive act) intermediates the cognitive actors—teacher on the one hand and students on the other” (Freire, 2006/2007, p. 67). Paulo Freire believed in a transferral of knowledge much more effective than traditional banking methods, which was the transformative problem posing education. Contrary to the popular method of ‘feeding’ information to our students, with our words and mouth the spoon, this conceptual framework looks at the cognitive process that makes learning happen, the application.

While thinking of alternatives to our traditional teaching system, Slavin, who researches the effects of produced learning through cooperative learning, most definitely adds to the transformative change that Freire describes as part of his problem posing education methodology. Slavin (1995) states that “Cooperative learning refers to a variety of teaching methods in which students work in small groups to help one another learn academic content, it rarely replaces teacher instruction, however, it does replace individual seat work” (p.2). Cooperative learning adds to a low affective filter classroom, and often provide students peer to peer scaffolding, a necessary component to having a cognitive approach to learning, as well as a learning experience that does not rely on relay of information from one authoritative source.

This method of learning within the classroom helps learners move through something Lev Vygotsky, as well as Vygotskian theorists, call the Zone of Proximal Development, or the ZPD. Through the ZPD, learning is scaffolded, and can provide a new plateau of learning that could not be reached on one’s own. This allows for learning to be possible through interaction with others, and not with just an instructor or teacher of the language. The responsibility for

learning can be reached out farther from the hands of the teacher, and students can take that responsibility in their own hands, and create an optimal learning experience unique to their needs. “Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach” (Freire, 2006, 2007, p. 67). This quote from Freire’s book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* aids in defining the concept of scaffolding in a liberated classroom.

The subject of this ethnographic study, Joe, has become effectively able to communicate with his peers and teachers in English, thanks to the superb support that he is provided within the ESL curriculum. I have chosen Joe as my case study student because not only is he present at almost every class session, but I have always thought that he spoke in class a lot to everyone, regardless of the stated intermediate English proficiency level of the class. I had always thought that his level bar and potential were much higher than with what I was presented, and thought it would be an interesting aspect to cover with further research.

This ethnographic case study analyzes Joe’s ESL instructional experience separated into three parts. First, I will attempt to explain the problem posing education theory, and how it affects language instruction in the classroom Joe is in. Secondly, I will examine how this framework is incorporated and reflected in the classroom through the sociocultural perspective, and it’s effects on cooperative language learning and interaction. Lastly, I will explain how having a low Affective Filter classroom adds to the learning experience by providing a safe classroom where learners feel safe to communicate and exchange ideas with one another. Furthermore, I will attempt to explain how this has affected Joe’s learning experience and

perhaps provide some insight as to how he became able to interact so freely with his classmates through the lens of Communicative Language Teaching.

Participant information

Joe is a sixteen year old boy from the Philippines whose native language is Tagalog, but primary language, Ilokano. He is a grade eleven high school student who has attended intermediate school in the United States, but enrolled in an ESL program. During the time of observation, this was Joe's fifth year being enrolled in an ESL program, in which his class consisted of usually, eight students. He is interested in cars, and would always be interested in reading any articles that were related to cars or automobiles. Joe lives with nine family members, where five of them is his immediate family, and four his extended family, in a large two story house near the school.

The school classifies Joe as an intermediate ESL student, and the class that he is enrolled in reflects that level of proficiency. Based on the California English Language Development Standards (2012), I would expect Joe to be in the expanding proficiency levels for every skill listed in the ELD standards. However, depending on the subject or content that is being used for evaluative purposes, during my observation, there have been times where I have noticed bridging occurring in the collaborative aspect, which makes a lot of sense and ties into the original theme of this case study. Although he was not given the CELDT as a placement test, Joe was given the WIDA Access test and was placed into a low intermediate course at the time of his arrival into high school. The test scores have been reproduced from the original document, keeping all scores, numbers, and category descriptions as given, and can be viewed in Appendix A.

School and classroom demographics

The location of the case study hosting school is a high school on the island of Maui, Hawai'i. This school has been rated one of the best high schools in STEM education by parents and the community of Maui. It is located in the central part of town and has a pretty big campus, but has a small sub section, about 3 portables with AC equipped with computers that are reserved for English Language Learners at the school. The school refers to English Language Learners as ELLs, and the students are split into classes based on their 'test-in' proficiencies, but there are times when there is a range, although small, of proficiencies in the classroom.

Because the mass of the ELLs that attend the school are from the Pacific Island region, there are many students that come from the Philippines or Micronesia, and therefore many educators that work at the school have proficiency in those languages to help these students. After students take their placement test for English, they are then categorized into beginning, intermediate, or advanced level English. At all stages, students are immersed into mainstream classes slowly, to help develop their English skills in a normal classroom setting. However, depending on their proficiency level, they may need assistants, but often students that have lower proficiency levels are immersed into elective courses, such as the arts, rather than content courses, which more advanced level proficient students are the students who are placed into those courses.

According to the school's Accountability Report, The student population is represented by the following cultures/ethnicities: Filipino, Hawaiian, Samoan, Tongan, Japanese, Portuguese, Chinese, Hispanic, Vietnamese, Laotian, Korean, Thai, and Marshallese. The school currently serves 1,960 students, with an average class size of 19 students. The number and percent of students with limited English proficiency ranges to about 206 students, which is about 11% of

the student population. The number of students receiving free or reduced lunch cost is about 800 students, which is about 43% of the student population. The grade level student population is the most during grade 9, and slowly decrease to grade 12. Average daily attendance for students is about 93%. The drop out rates have been decreasing over the years, but as of right now stand at around 13%. There are about 101 classrooms available in the school. There are 110 total full time equivalent teachers, which 109 are fully licensed and 1 emergency hire, and also 9 total FTE administration staff. The school is accredited by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges.

Methods

Data collection

According to Genzuk (1998), there are three different kinds of data collection typically used in ethnographic research, which are interviews, observations, and documents. All of these kinds of data were collected during the time of this study. Throughout the study, I had observed directly class activities, and the way that Joe has interacted with his teacher, peers, and the lesson. Before the class sessions began, I had received from the teacher lesson materials that would be used in teaching the lesson for the class when applicable, and had ample resource time to look through the textbook (*Visions*) from WIDA, which guided the ESL curriculum given by the site. This allowed me much better insight on how to assess Joe's learning experience.

Throughout the study, I have had interviews with Joe, and with his ESL teacher, of whom he had for two years. The interviews and classroom interactions were documented in a fieldwork journal, and with an audio recording device when it was deemed necessary. The questions used for the interview can be viewed in Appendix B.

Limitations

This case study was limited in what could be gathered due to a ten week time constraint, and furthermore a four week constraint due to the difficulty of acquiring parental/guardian permission, which left approximately six weeks to gather data to analyze about Joe. Another factor is that I was only granted access to observe Joe in his normal ESL classroom, and was unable to acquire any other relevant information from his other core curriculum teachers. Because of this scope, along with Joe's family's work schedule, there was just not an ample amount of time to schedule, and conduct an interview with his parents. However, the best effort will be made to analyze data of what could be gathered.

Analysis

Problem posing education and the affective filter

In the typical classroom at this site, the environment a learner is put in represents both, an education institution of learning, as well as a second home for the students. A lot of efforts goes to make sure that students feel comfortable in their place of learning, and it is one of the schools goals to provide students a safe environment to freely share their thoughts and opinions regardless of race, cultural values, or any other sort of discrimination. This allows the students to freely participate in a problem posing education type of classroom without fear of being hassled by others depending on their own views or beliefs.

Through my observations, I have found that the low affective filtered classroom environment was due to the friendliness and openness of the home culture being able to become a part of the language learning experience. Trumball, E. et al. (2000) states that "While collectivistic cultures tend to teach to the whole group and allow students to learn from each other (peer-oriented learning) (McAlpine & Taylor 1993), individualistic societies tend to focus

on the individual and emphasize individual responsibility for learning, even when instruction is given to the whole group (Estrin & Nelson-Barber 1995)” (p. 6). Trumball et al. (2000) certainly discuss that US schools focus more on the individual rather than the collective, however the site’s ESL program setting seeks the opposite, to ensure the success of their students as a whole, and strive to obtain successful learning through teamwork (Jeffs, 2015, personal contact). In order to do this, the classroom ideology shifts to a cooperative learning focus, and looks at interaction to work as a method of scaffolding between the teacher and students. I will discuss this in the next section.

Cooperative learning

Cooperative learning is an excellent transformative tool that turns a lesson into a cooperative one by applying basic cooperative structures. Doing this allows for a learning experience to be shared between learners, and can overall provide a much more exciting learning experience. Kagan (1998) furthers the idea by adding the factor of multiple intelligences. He states: “When applied to the implementation of multiple intelligences (MI) theory, it has the potential to sidestep the cycle of replacement and to create truly inclusive classrooms” (p. 105).

Looking at the list of activities, lessons, and planning that went into the curriculum during my observations, most of the time, the teacher had students work in pairs or groups, to help students use their language skills in an informal interactive approach, while he moves around the room to help scaffold for the students as they progressed through the activity. Throughout the activities, Joe tended to have varying levels of participation based on the topic that was being learnt, or depending on his mood. Joe has told me through the interview that depending on how he feels, or how much he wants to communicate, on top of how interesting the topic is can affect his level of interaction in the classroom, for better or worse. However, he has

also told me that because the classroom is a place that he feels safe to use English, it has helped him learn more to apply in his normal English course.

Because of this focus on cooperative learning, there is something that Slavin (2000) introduces, which is called the Teams Games Tournament or TGT. TGT has many of the same dynamics as Student Team Achievement Divisions, or STAD, but adds a dimension of excitement contributed by the use of games (Slavin, 1995, p. 6). Through this method and through the sociocultural theory, this method of teaching invites students to compete in games, and encourage each other to do well to win the game through meaningful interaction. Because of the small class size (the class that Joe is enrolled in has eight students), the instructor is able to break up the students into small groups every once in a while to play a game that has students working together to answer questions based on articles that they have either read or listened to from the internet. I had observed this activity during one of my observations, and all students participated fully, especially Joe, who had almost something to say about every question.

Communicative language learning and the role of interaction

Referring to Appendix A, you can see the proficiency that Joe has obtained in terms of his speaking skill. Because of Joe's love to interact with those around him, his scores based on his speaking tasks are relatively high when compared to his other language skills. This is perhaps due to Joe's comfortability in the language program of the site, as well as the environment that the instructor has set up for his class. By having a high rapport, low affective filtered classroom, Joe is able to participate in activities in class freely, and reaps the positive affects to his English language skill development.

Keeping the idea of Kagan's cooperative learning theory in mind, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is one of the new, more popular methods to be introduced in the

language learning curriculum. By providing students with tasks, the goal is to get students to be able to complete said tasks using the language they have learned in the classroom, which is designed to help provide students with high frequency words, phrases, or expressions that they may encounter in any given situation. Groger (2004) gives some ideas of meaningful activities and tasks that he uses in his classroom, which includes “social interaction activities, conversation and discussion sessions, dialogues and role-plays, simulations, skit improvisations, and debate” (p. 143). During my interview with the ESL instructor, I found out that the most widely used type of activity used in the school’s language program are discussions for the higher proficient students, and role-plays throughout all levels.

During my last observation, I found that Joe was recently looking for a part time job after school, and was utilizing the skills he had learned in his guidance class to apply for a janitorial job at a nearby restaurant. In CLT, Celce-Murcia (2013), describes one of the goals for CLT as “content is academic or job related material, which becomes the course focus with language learning as a simultaneous concern” (p. 8). Due to the funds of knowledge that Joe possesses, with a little scaffolding from myself, he was able to successfully apply for the part time job, which was his own success, as he also started to understand the discourse of a job seeker, so he knew what it is he has to do the next time he is presented with a similar situation. By completing this task, Joe was involved in a CLT type task, which used interaction as a mean to communicate with the employer.

Recommendations

Some recommendations that the school could take into consideration is finding a club outside of the classroom for ESL students to engage in English language dialogue outside of the classroom. This could be seen as an opportunity to not only have a mediated form of practice in

English that is supervised, but is a good way for students who are serious about learning how to speak English to engage in conversation with others who have the same goal in mind.

Another recommendation would be to incorporate a silent sustained reading session into the classroom activities. Often during my observation, there were lots of time leftover usually following the lesson, and although this time can be used for ESL instructors to engage in conversation with their students about their home and school life, some time per week could be set aside to incorporate this strategy. Reutzel et al. (2008), conducted a study on whether or not SSR had an effect on student performance, stating that “In general, students indicated both reading fluency practice treatments helped them to become better readers. Teachers found some initial problems in implementing the reading fluency practice treatments. However, as the year progressed, students and teachers seemed to enjoy the time for practice” (p. 48). While there is a lack of evidence for a heightened level of reading skill or comprehension, it seems to be a fun practice that most students tend to enjoy. Joe could use this recommendation in order to deepen his interests during the school time while practicing his English, which could make him much more open and alert to the material for the rest of the day.

Conclusion

Joe has done a remarkable job in exploring his language skills, and has given countless examples that show he is developing his English language skills very well. While he often very outspoken in class, and could sometimes cause a little noise disturbance to others, one could clearly understand just how much effort Joe puts into using as much language as he can with his peers, friends, and teachers. By applying a more PPE type of curriculum that focus on a the group rather than the individual, strategies like cooperative learning and communicative

language teaching could become highly effective methodologies, and could promote skills farther than just Joe, and should be looked into with much more thought.

Case study experience

Overall and in the most honest thought, the experience was both stressful, but well rewarding. I have come to understand the different types of restraints, skills, and hard work that come with ethnographic research, and I have developed a much higher level of respect for those who conduct this type of study. Although this was done in a ten-week span, and would probably be not as stressful with a more lenient time frame, this type of work is definitely not easy. I have also learned that there is much more to understanding students than just merely observing what they do in the classroom. By being able to work with the student up close, and getting to know them, it is easier to see just what other factors could be affecting their development. This is very important when one is at a loss as to why certain materials or concepts are not reaching the students. It may not be because the instructor is not teaching the material properly, or that the student cannot grasp the material, but there may be other underlying issues that could cause this lag in development. It is a very important concept and ideology that teachers should learn and continue to develop professionally and personally.

Appendix A

WIDA Access Test Score 2014

Language Domain	Scale Score (Possible 100-600)	Proficiency Level (Possible 1.0-6.0)
Listening	370	3.4
Speaking	405	5.7
Reading	360	2.7
Writing	389	3.8
Oral Language*	388	4.4
Literacy*	375	3.4
Comprehension*	363	2.9
Overall Score (Composite)*	378	3.7

* Oral Language = 50% Listening + 50% Speaking

* Literacy = 50% Reading + 50% Writing

* Comprehension = 70% Reading + 30% Listening

* Overall Score = 35% Reading + 35% Writing + 15% Listening + 15% Speaking

Student's performance by WIDA English Language Development Standards

Comprehension (Listening and Reading)

English Language Development Standards	# of items correct	Total # of items
Social and Instructional Language	4	8
Language of Language Arts	8	12
Language of Mathematics	7	12
Language of Science	2	9
Language of Social Studies	5	9

Speaking Tasks

English Language Development Standards	Raw Score	Total # of items
Social and Instructional	3	3
Language Arts/Social Studies	5	5
Mathematics/Science	4	5

Writing Tasks

English Language Development Standards	Linguistic Complexity		Vocabulary Usage		Language Control	
	Raw Score	Total Possible Points	Raw Score	Total Possible Points	Raw Score	Total Possible Points
Social and Instructional	3	6	3	6	2	6

Language Arts		0		0		0
Mathematics and Science	4	6	3	6	3	6
Language Arts and Social Studies	3	6	3	6	2	6

Description of Proficiency Levels

1	Entering	Knows and uses minimal social language and minimal academic language with visual and graphic support.
2	Emerging	Knows and uses some social English and general academic language with visual and graphic support.
3	Developing	Knows and uses social English and some specific academic language with visual support.
4	Expanding	Knows and uses social English and some technical academic language.
5	Bridging	Knows and uses social and academic language working with grade level material.
6	Reaching	Knows and uses social and academic language at the highest level measured by this test.

Appendix B

-Student Questions-

1. How long have you been on Maui?
2. How many people do you have in your family?
3. Who are you living with at home?
4. What language do you speak at home?
5. What language do you speak at school?
6. What language do you speak with your family? Friends? Do you mix these languages?
7. When and where do you have the opportunity to use English?
8. What kind of support services do you receive?
9. How long have you been in ESL classes?

-About Interaction-

1. In what situations do you interact with your friends?
2. What languages do your friends speak?
3. Do you speak to your friends in English, or in Ilokano/Tagalog?
4. How often do you talk to your classmates in ESL class outside of class?
5. How often do you speak to your classmates in your core classes?
6. Do you speak to your other teachers often?
7. What kinds of things do you like to talk about?
8. Do you find yourself asking for help with assignments when you don't understand the directions, or do you try to figure it out yourself?
9. Do you often ask your core class teachers to repeat the directions, or information? What do you do when you don't understand something?

-Teacher Questions-

1. What kinds of services do the students receive?
2. What program helps decide the textbook and the curriculum set for the school's ESL program?
3. What are your favorite types of activities to use in the classroom?
4. Do you like to do role plays?
5. How do role plays help students to develop their language skills?
6. What other types of activities do you use to promote communication and interaction?
7. Do you like to give students individual or group work?
8. Do they do more individual or group work throughout the year?
9. What types of activities do you give to students when they are paired in groups?
10. How big are the groups?
11. Are they switched around time to time?
12. Do these groups engage in class games?
13. What kind of games do you like to have students play?
14. What kind of material do you use in these games to promote learning?
15. Do you find that the material stays with students longer this way?
16. How often do you let students share their opinions about a certain topic?
17. Has there ever been any conflict regarding this issue?

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