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# **Cooperative Learning and In-service Teacher Training: A Suggested Approach**

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The approach to in-service teacher training presented here—one that we have been following in the in-service teacher training at the American University of Beirut (AUB) — provides a scheme for organizing training programs for teachers of English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL). The approach proclaims cooperative learning (CL) as an underlying philosophy and assumes that aspects of methodology are best inculcated in teachers in-training through direct experience and demonstration. It also assumes that training is a continuous process and that the workshop format addresses the immediate needs of teacher trainees and is inclusive of several other ways of teacher training such as seminars, panel discussions, and peer networking.

## **Theoretical and Research Underpinnings**

Over the past few decades, there has been a growing interest in CL as a prosocial approach for improving academic achievement, intellectual development, and language learning. Research has shown that CL promotes higher achievement than all forms of individualistic teacher-centered learning across all age levels, subject areas, and all tasks except perhaps rote and decoding kinds of tasks (Johnson, Muryama, Johnson, Nelson & Skon, 1981; Slavin, 1983a; Smith, Johnson & Johnson, 1991). Studies also report improved social development such as liking of classmates (Slavin, 1979, 1983b), reduced social stereotyping and discrimination (Cohen, 1980), and better intellectual competence (Kagan, 1989). Likewise, studies show gains in activities related to academic performance such as increased peer tutoring (Cohen & Kulik, 1981), increased frequency of practice (Armstrong, Johnson, & Balow, 1981), and increased time on task (Slavin, 1983a).

Along similar lines, research has shown that CL fosters language development and integration of language and content through increased active communication and use of language for academic and social functions. It has also been shown that CL promotes active student participation and involvement. Studies have shown that in the traditional language classroom, where teachers do most of the talking only 20-25 percent of students actually listen to the teacher (Cohen, 1984). Furthermore, student language production in such classes tends to be sequential, one student at a time,

which results in minimal student language production. In contrast, up to 80 percent of CL class time may be rescheduled for activities that include simultaneous student talk (Olsen & Kagan, 1992). This increased communication can be important to language learners, especially limited English proficient (LEP) learners who usually receive little teacher and peer communication in the traditional classroom. Needless to say, the linguistic complexity of communication increases as the learners are engaged in stating new information, giving explanation, offering rationales, and showing integration of information (Olsen & Kagan, 1992). This increased complexity often results in higher quality discourse as students better comprehend each other as well as take opportunities to practice their paralinguistic skills—gestures, facial and shoulder expressions, and so on.

The preceding benefits of CL have promoted educators to expand its applications into the domains of pre-service and in-service teacher preparation. For example, Whitaker (1990) maintains that regular group work and cooperative activities increase the teacher trainees' "confidence needed in order not to be too dominant in their classrooms" (p. 161). These activities also increase the trainees "readiness" to listen to, learn from, and reveal themselves to others. Likewise, Shaw (1992) argues for CL as a significant component in programs concerned with pre-service preparation of language teachers. He builds his argument on the premise that demonstrating and experiencing CL enhances the effectiveness of teacher preparation, adds enjoyment to the learning experience, and improves teachers' self-esteem and preparedness to work with other teachers. In addition, he argues that CL has much wider applications than many recent foreign language (FL) methods as it can be used with larger groups of learners and is not committed to a particular view of language learning or a particular syllabus.

### **Practical Orientation**

The approach presented here emphasizes needs analysis, hand-on application, and light didactic teaching as it attempts to move away from theory without giving it up altogether. The approach integrates both experiential practice (practicum) and awareness raising (theory) as defined by Ellis (1990). Thus the trainees experience meaningful exposures to the teaching/learning process through observing certain techniques and activities in action, following which, they may produce similar activities with the content of their curriculum and teaching context in mind. They may also keep journals of reflective writing and produce posters that demonstrate their assimilation of practiced activities and techniques.

However, this is not to say that the approach falls into a pattern in teacher training with "heavy reliance" on procedures and techniques without proper understanding of the underlying theoretical assumptions (Ramani, 1990, p. 196).

Rather in this approach the theory or principles behind the techniques are either deduced or presented to the participants after the demonstrations. In this sense, the approach is compatible with the process approaches for teacher training recommended by Cross (1993) and Woodward (1992) in that there is emphasis on needs assessment and that the ideas promoted in the workshop are about ways of “enabling, sharing, eliciting, encouraging, questioning, responding, and developing as well as about didactic transmission of action as telling, helping, and informing” (Woodward, 1992, p. 3). Nonetheless, of the three ways recommended by Woodward for structuring workshop encounters (lectures, discussion, brainstorming), this approach adopts the last two. It also stresses experiential learning where participants witness the demystification of the training process by learning about content and process simultaneously through observing trainers using the dynamics of the activities and techniques they are trying to teach.

### **The Approach**

The approach divides in-service teacher training into five major stages: needs assessment, exposure/observation, application/coaching, evaluation, and follow-up. Of course the five stages are interrelated in the sense that the techniques and activities selected for exposure and observation are grounded in the needs determined in the first stage. Likewise, the application/coaching stage is based on the activities and techniques shown and/or demonstrated in the exposure/observation stage, and the evaluation and follow-up stages address the feasibility of these activities and techniques.

#### **Needs assessment**

The first step in planning in-service programs is defining and analyzing local needs as perceived by administrators, trainees in the field, counselors, aides, parents, and students (Winn-Bell Olsen, 1992). The techniques of interviews and questionnaires provide multiple sources of data regarding the training and language needs to be addressed in the workshop. However, despite utilizing multiple sources, needs assessment data are usually reported as group trends where there may be important individual differences that should be explored. Consequently, it is advisable to follow the negotiated syllabus approach in order to determine the training needs of participants and the language needs of their students.

#### **Exposure/Observation**

Upon assessing needs, the workshop activities and techniques can be determined. Here it is important either to show the selected techniques on video or to demonstrate them. Participants may also read about and discuss the techniques under consideration. It is also equally important to focus on the activities and techniques

that are appropriate for the nature of the material and tasks to be taught. For example, while the techniques of Student Teams Achievement Division (STAD) and Teams Game Tournament (TGT) are most appropriate for teaching materials that can be divided into discrete units and well-defined objectives such as syntax and language mechanics, the Group Investigation and Co-op techniques are suitable for problem solving and curriculum design. Likewise, the Jigsaw techniques are appropriate for teaching materials in a narrative form such as sociolinguistics, theory, and research findings, whereas the techniques of Think-Pair-Share, Mixer-Review and Numbered Heads are appropriate for reviewing any subject matter at all levels of instruction. (See Note 1 for further reading).

### **Application/Coaching**

During the application/coaching stage, the trainees apply the activities and techniques they have seen in action to their own curriculum and teaching context. The principles of coaching are introduced, explained, and demonstrated to participants. The participants are then organized in coaching pairs whereby they meet and assign the task to be observed. The presenters of model lessons receive feedback from their coaching partners on selected aspects of their practice, reflect on their teaching, and plan for further activities.

First the trainees develop their own lesson plans and prepare the necessary worksheets, reading materials, quizzes, answer sheets, and instructional checklist. Then they implement their lesson plans and receive feedback according to the following steps suggested by Olsen (1993).

#### **1. Set-up**

Teacher tells observer what to watch

Observer verifies topic

Coaching is scheduled: Observation and de-briefing sessions

#### **2. Observation**

Observer is introduced to class

Observer takes notes, uses checklist, etc.

Observer thanks class then leaves

#### **3. De-Briefing**

Thanks for the chance. I appreciated / enjoyed / learned

What happened?

What did you think about it?

How did you feel?

#### **4. Reflection and more teaching** (See Note 2 for further reading).

### **Evaluation**

Following peer coaching, the participants evaluate their workshop experience through panel discussions, poster sessions, journals of reflective writing, questionnaires and/or interviews. These forms of evaluation fall under two major types: a) a continuing and b) summative. In the first type (journals of reflective writing and interviews) students record/report their feelings and impressions as the workshop goes on. In the second type (panel discussion, poster session, and questionnaire) participants demonstrate their assimilation of the workshop activities by means of presenting their ideas or by responding to questions intended for evaluating the workshop experience. This provides further opportunities for understanding and assimilation of workshop content as well as planning for future training.

### **Follow-up**

The final stage is a follow-up one-day session intended to evaluate the implementation of the workshop content in the participants' own instructional settings. The participants return to the trainers after having had the chance to try out the workshop for discussion of the applicability of the concepts, activities, and techniques. Together they discuss the problems, make possible modifications, reassess their needs, reflect on their experience, and plan for future training activities.

### **Conclusion**

Teacher preparation can take a variety of shapes and forms ranging from the apprenticeship model to distance training. The approach presented here aims at linking training needs to classroom practice while providing the trainees maximum opportunities for experiencing the teaching/learning process in action as well as developing and trying out their own lesson plans in a stress-free environment. The approach, too, promotes continuous growth and reflection on practice.

### **Notes**

For interested readers some references to the dynamics of implementing the content of the approach:

1. Think-Pair-Share, Mixer Review, Numbered Heads and other similar techniques: Kagan, S. (1989). *Cooperative Learning Resources for Teachers*. San Juan Capistrano, CA: Resources for Teachers.

STAD, TGT, Jigsaw, Co-op Co-op, Group Investigation: Slavin, R.(1990). *Cooperative Learning: Theory, Research, and Practice*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

2. Peer Coaching: Joyce & Showers (1983). *Power of Staff Development Through Research on Training*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

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