12Cs FOR SCHOOL SUCCESS: LEARNING THROUGH COLLABORATION

"Two heads are better than one." This saying describes the benefits of working collaboratively with others to get things accomplished. English Language Learners benefit enormously by negotiating the meaning of what they learn through interaction with peers.

Opportunities for frequent and extended interactions related to meaningful tasks are crucial for continued language and cognitive development. English Language Learners need opportunities to interact with others concerning content information, to pose questions, and to engage in tasks in an informal, but language-rich, atmosphere. In addition, a truly collaborative approach to learning helps to create an environment of equity where students share responsibilities and make connections in their learning.

There are various ways to structure learning through collaboration, some of which are more preferable than others. This Bulletin examines the rationale for collaboration, its features, and suggestions for structuring a more collaborative approach to learning.

WHY COLLABORATION?
There are several important reasons for fostering a collaborative environment for English Language Learners:
1. Collaboration enables learners to use language in a variety of ways and to negotiate the meaning of the content being presented. By working with new concepts and the language associated with those concepts in groups, learners have the opportunity to clarify their understanding and to use the language necessary to describe, explain, and apply the information in a variety of ways.
2. In a collaborative setting, learners have the opportunity to use language socially, academically, and culturally. English Language Learners can practice language in a social group context as they perform tasks; use it academically as they practice the concepts being learned; and use language both formally and informally in culturally appropriate ways as they present what they have learned to different student and adult audiences.
3. Collaboration involves increased content use and application of content to a variety of learning contexts. Working with others involves implicit use of problem-solving skills and creative use of content in tasks which apply knowledge to be learned in meaningful ways.
4. Collaboration involves everyone in the learning process. When done well, collaborative learning engages all participants equally.
5. Collaboration involves relationship-building among learners. Working in a variety of group formats allows learners to learn from each other and to cooperate in accomplishing tasks.
FEATURES OF EFFECTIVE COLLABORATIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

1. Assigned roles. Everyone has a responsibility in a group. There is no ambiguity with regard to roles. As a result, individual participation ensures involvement and reduces the perception that one or a few people do most of the work.

2. Varied roles within a group. Each participant takes turns assuming any one of several possible roles: captain, timekeeper, materials monitor, presenter, scribe, etc. This ensures equal participation within a group.

3. Varied groupings. By organizing groups according to a variety of different criteria or periodically allowing for random grouping, teachers can enable learners to work in a variety of social and skill-related formats, depending on the needs of the task or the individual skills of the learners.

4. Problem-solving. A primary rationale for group work is to problem-solve issues related to learning content; therefore, collaboration serves to support each member’s efforts to construct responses to content-related learning tasks.

STRUCTURES FOR LEARNING COLLABORATIVELY

1. Teambuilding. This is a structure for enabling learners to become more acquainted with one another, for encouraging equal participation, and for allowing expression of ideas and opinions. A sample technique is roundrobin, where each student in turn shares something with his or her teammates.

2. Communication-Building. This is a structure for checking comprehension, providing feedback, and sharing ideas. A sample technique is talking chips, where students receive a specified number of chips or tokens and donate them each time they talk; they cannot speak again until all chips are in the center and collected.

3. Concept Development. This is a structure for generating and sharing ideas and for listening. A sample technique is think-pair-share, where students think to themselves about a topic. They pair up with another student to discuss it; finally, they share their thoughts with the class.

4. Mastery. This structure is for reviewing and for checking comprehension. A sample technique is numbered heads together, where the teacher asks a question, and students consult to make sure everyone knows the answer; finally, one student is called upon to answer.

5. Division of Labor. This structure helps create group interdependence by allowing each student to become an "expert" in an aspect of the material to be covered. A sample technique is jigsaw, where each student is assigned a specific amount of information to be learned and then teaches it to other members of the group.

6. Problem-Solving. This structure compels students to communicate with each other in order to complete a task. A sample technique is information gap, where students are directed to question each other to obtain missing information. For example, one student describes a picture to another student, who then has to draw it.

7. Other Collaboration Structures. Cooperative projects, writing conferences, and learning centers are other examples of student collaboration, each of which provides a setting for learning with others.

CONCLUSION

If at first a collaboration structure does not succeed with students, don’t give up! The unfamiliarity of working with others around a task can be daunting to students accustomed to working alone or inhibited about taking risks with language. The payoff for collaboration is enormous for all learners; however, for English Language Learners, collaboration greatly enhances their experience in using language.

SOURCES:


