INTRODUCING BUSINESS ENGLISH STUDENTS TO PEER-LEARNING

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Abstract
This paper addresses the issues of cooperative learning and peer-learning by presenting the case of introducing a group of 15 students of Business English to such practice. The participants took Business English 4 as an elective course in their 4th semester of study at the Faculty of Economics, University of Split. The motivation to design the course curriculum around this practice was twofold. First, we responded to the need to create a more learner-centered classroom and introduce more varied, engaging and up-to-date topics. Second, since students learn from each other in many different ways, we wanted to transform this spontaneous and unpredictable process into an organized and controlled classroom activity. Having completed collaborative and peer-learning assignments, the students filled in a questionnaire developed by the authors to obtain feedback and explore the students’ motivational disposition. The paper focuses on the following areas: the theory behind collaborative/peer-learning, the classroom procedure as applied in this case, analysis of students’ feedback collected with a questionnaire, and the results of the classroom observation by the language teacher.

Keywords: peer-learning, collaborative learning, Business English, motivation

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper presents the case study of introducing Business English students to peer-learning. This practice is introduced as a response to the current requirements of English language teaching (ELT). Namely, the ELT research calls for more learner centredness and more learner autonomy. These goals are not easy to achieve and there are no straightforward guidelines or instructions for teachers. The benefits of such approach can start surfacing long after students have left their formal education and the effects are not easily measurable, as “what is learned... serves learners’ wider agendas” (Little, 2002).

Weimer (2012) summarises the characteristics of learner-centred teaching in the following five points:

(i) Learner-centred teaching engages students in the hard, messy work of learning because they need to get more practice in developing the sophisticated learning skills.
(ii) Learner-centred teaching includes explicit skill instruction, i.e. students are not expected to develop the necessary skills completely on their own. They need to be taught and directed.
(iii) Learner-centred teaching encourages students to reflect on what they are learning and how they are learning it, i.e. they are engaged in conversations about how they learn.
(iv) Learner-centred teaching motivates students by giving them some control over learning processes. This calls for empowering students to take part in deciding what students should learn, how they should learn it, the pace at which they should learn it, etc.
(v) Learner-centred teaching encourages collaboration, as research has shown that students can learn with and from each other.

Collins and Brian (2003) see the terms learner-centred as synonymous to student-centred as in student-centred instruction students are involved in designing what and how they learn. The student (learner) is central to the learning process while the instructor creates the environment for individual and collaborative learning using the appropriate scaffolding. On the other hand, Weimer makes the difference between the two and sees the term...
“student-centred” as more of a commercial, customer-oriented concept which focuses on student needs rather than on turning students into more active participants of the learning process.

“Learner autonomy consists in becoming aware of, and identifying, one's strategies, needs, and goals as a learner, and having the opportunity to reconsider and refashion approaches and procedures for optimal learning” (Thanasoulas, 2000). Accordingly, increasing levels of learner-centeredness should lead to more autonomous learners. Furthermore, it needs to be reiterated that becoming autonomous does not mean learning without teachers or instruction. Autonomy can only be achieved with the help of a teacher who will show the way (Thanasoulas, 2000).

For the purpose of this article we adopted the term peer-learning although there is a lot of variation in the terminology applied to the situations where students learn together, to put it plainly. For Topping (2005) peer learning is “the acquisition of knowledge and skill through active helping and supporting among status equals or matched companions” (Topping, 2005) and it is used as an umbrella term for different forms of peer-learning such as: peer tutoring, collaborative learning, peer counselling and education, peer assessment.

According to the Johnson & Johnson model (Johnson, D. W.; Johnson, R. T.; Smith, K. A., 1998), cooperative learning is instruction that involves students working in teams to accomplish a common goal. Apart from the fact that it is group work there are other conditions to be met in order for something to qualify as cooperative learning. Johnson et al. (1998) emphasise: Positive interdependence; Individual accountability; Face-to-face promotive interaction; Appropriate use of collaborative skills; Group processing.

At ITWORX education, a market leader in educational software solutions, they see collaborative learning as learning with each other and peer-to-peer learning as learning from each other. Collaborative learning tasks involve a pair or a group of equals who put their strengths together to complete a task. On the other hand, peer-to-peer learning assumes there are weaker students who may need help from their more skilful colleagues. More advanced students may also benefit from this activity by further increasing their understanding of the topic and by practicing their exposition skills. Topping (2005) too recognises the possibility that in a group of equals there might be a “helper [who] is intended to be “learning by teaching” and also to be a more proximate and credible model”.

A potential danger in implementing peer learning lies in approaching it too lightly. Organising students in groups and hoping to obtain results is not peer learning. For example, Bennett et al. (1984) found that while children were often placed in groups, mostly they worked as individuals. Successful peer-learning occurs when activities are organised to meet the specific needs of the given context and population (Topping, 2001). In Slavin’s words (1990) cooperative learning means „structuring positive interdependence“ in order to achieve a common goal.

Finally, learners’ recognized needs and goals can also be described in terms of reasons / motives for learning English. While motivation is regarded as a central “mediator in the prediction of language achievement” (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993, p. 3) specific types of motivation to learn English have been found to correlate more strongly with intended effort or learning outcomes than others (Dörnyei et al., 2006; Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015). Two exploratory studies conducted on similar populations in Croatia found somewhat different types of motivation among learners. Mihaljević Djigunović’s study (1998) determined the existence of pragmatic-communicative motivation (an instrumental type of motivation with a prominent communicative-pragmatic component and goals that could be realized in present or in future), affective motivation (reflecting various aspects of liking the English language) and integrative motivation (reflecting the wish to integrate into a socio-cultural group that speaks English as the native language). Fifteen years later, Kabalin Borenić (2013) found that university students of business were characterized by integrative motivation and two types of instrumental motivation, one reflecting future, expected benefits for travel, communication and career, the other deriving from present, experienced benefits for education and entertainment. Mihaljević Djigunović (1998) found that pragmatic-communicative motivation had the strongest correlation with learning outcomes while Kabalin Borenić (2013) found that instrumental motivation deriving from present, experienced benefits had the
strongest correlation with invested effort and was its best predictor. Instrumental motivation reflecting future, expected benefits was not a predictor of invested effort.

2. AIM AND METHODOLOGY

2.1. Aim

The aim of this paper was to present the case of introducing peer-learning as the main element of the teaching/learning process in a business English course and to investigate students’ perceptions and attitudes towards this experience.

2.2. Methodology

The data presented in this paper were collected by observing a group of students engaged in peer-learning during the summer semester of the academic year 2015/2016. Upon the completion of the set tasks the students completed a questionnaire in Croatian developed by the authors and administered online using the Moodle platform. Descriptive statistics were generated by the Moodle.

2.2.1 Participants

Participants of this study were 15 students of the Faculty of Economics, University of Split who had learnt English for 10 or more years. Their estimated language proficiency was B2 or higher. They took the course Business English 4 in the second year, fourth semester of their studies. The course is elective and by successfully completing it students obtain 2 ECTS points. The small number of ECTS points granted for this course makes it rather unattractive for students.

2.2.2. Teaching process

Until four years ago Business English 4 was taught at an upper-intermediate level based on a widely used business English course book. Responding to the students’ request to introduce more interesting topics the course curriculum was redesigned to include authentic contemporary texts and foster student autonomy.

First, the course lecturer selected four topics by consulting the business section of the BBC news and BBC Travel web sites (http://www.bbc.com/news/business): Entrepreneurship, Global education, Technology of business, and Living in. These sections feature a selection of up-to-date articles dealing with current business related topics.

All students, working in teams of three, actively participated in the process by selecting one article per each of the four topics. The process consisted of three phases:

(i) The students were introduced to a given topic using an introductory text and accompanying exercises designed by the teacher.

(ii) The students were assigned to study the article of their choice at home and prepare a commentary and a set of exercises for their team members. The students were asked to design either language or content exercises related to the topic of their article. They were given no specific instruction as regards the type of exercises assuming they would activate their experience as learners. Each team member was in charge of half an hour of team work. The teacher scheduled a deadline by which the students had to upload their assignments on the Moodle platform.

(iii) Each student presented their article to the team and set the tasks prepared in advance. The students were encouraged to complete the tasks working together. Finally, the team members were
required to discuss/compare their three articles. In this phase the teacher moved around the classroom, offering support if necessary and encouraging interaction.

Obviously, our method is a blend of cooperative learning and peer learning since it assumes the learners to approach the task as equals in terms of language proficiency and learning skills (although a fully homogeneous group is hardly to be expected) while each team member plays the facilitator’s role for his/her article (presenting, clarifying, and moderating the discussion).

2.2.3. Questionnaire

The questionnaire consisted of 25 questions out of which fifteen 5-point Likert scale questions, three multiple-choice questions, and seven open-ended questions (see Appendix 1 – translated into English by the authors). The students filled it in voluntarily and anonymously.

The questions investigated four main topics: students’ reaction to peer-learning (items 4, 5, 12, 13, 24, 25); ways of handling the tasks (items 6 – 10, 16, 19, 20); the influence of previous learning experience (items 14, 15, 17, 18); students’ perception of the effects of peer-learning (items 11, 21, 22, 23).

Finally, the questionnaire collected the data on previous encounters with peer-learning (item 3) and students’ general motives for learning English (items 1, 2). The motives were formulated as statements describing four broad reasons for learning English previously found among Croatian university students: integrative motivation and affective motivation (Mihaljević Djigunović, 1998); instrumental motivation - expected benefits and instrumental motivation – experienced benefits (Kabalin Borenić, 2013). The students were asked to choose the most important reason for learning English.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Questionnaire

As regards the students’ reaction to peer-learning we found that eight out of fifteen students appreciated the learning situation in which they had to prepare individual assignments beforehand and share them with their team-mates in class. Only two students strongly disagreed with this approach while five students were undecided. When asked to say how inspiring they found the opportunity to create tasks on their own, their response was the same.

Concerning the tasks prepared by colleagues, as many as twelve students were satisfied with their contributions and three were undecided. Only one student remarked that there were too many tasks.

Although the above results indicate that students appreciated the elements of flipped classroom presented in our course design, only one student preferred working individually at home to working with their team-mates in class. Six students preferred what they did in class and eight were undecided. Finally, only two students preferred having a leadership role and presenting a topic to listening and completing tasks prepared by other members of their team. As many as eight students preferred the more passive role of recipients.

Students’ commitment to the tasks was obvious and resulted in regular and timely submissions of their varied tasks. These were not comparable to the exercises designed by professional material developers but they served the purpose of engaging students in meaningful interaction with the texts. Unfortunately, in the present generation this did not always lead to the active interaction with other colleagues which was the ultimate goal of the whole approach.

The students handled the tasks in a number of different ways. Firstly, the time they devoted to preparing the home assignment for each class ranged from 30 minutes to 3 hours, with an average of 1 hour 45 minutes per participant. As regards their classroom involvement, ten students out of fifteen were able to fully concentrate on their colleagues’ contributions and only one had a problem focusing. Another question revealed that only one
student found it easier to concentrate on his own texts and assignments. When a problem with understanding occurred, eight students would interrupt the presenter/author of the tasks and ask for clarification while seven students chose not to ask questions and tried to grasp the general idea from the context. The inclination toward individual approach was even more pronounced when it came to solving the tasks: nine students worked on their own whereas only six of them collaborated with their team-mates. When they chose to communicate within the team, all of them combined English and Croatian. As regards using online dictionaries, nine students used them as a reference and six students did not.

With most teams the classroom work required a lot of encouragement from the teacher to engage in more cooperation while working on their tasks. This was even more evident on occasions when some team members were absent and new teams had to be formed. As indicated by the students’ responses they combined English and their mother tongue, which is an expected and natural behaviour in a classroom where all the students share a common mother tongue. Classroom observation showed that students often consulted Google translate when looking for vocabulary solutions. In some cases, they also referred to the teacher to provide explanations. These opportunities were used to indicate a range of other resources (online dictionaries or corpora) that may be helpful in finding answers to such problems.

The set of questions about the influence of previous learning experience addresses the students’ ability to benefit from years of exposure to English instruction and a wide variety of resources available to learners of English. Fourteen students stated that in designing their own tasks they benefited from the teaching materials they had learned from. As regards the introductory material prepared by the teacher, thirteen students agreed that it helped them to formulate their tasks. When asked to specify where their ideas for task design came from, seven students mentioned the materials from the introductory class, while four indicated tasks and course books used in their previous education. Other resources that the students found helpful in creating their tasks were Google translate, online dictionaries and paper dictionaries.

As expected, students’ tasks revealed that they successfully imitated the types of exercises they were familiar with. A slight tendency to overuse certain types of exercises was noted, e.g. true or false or vocabulary matching exercises. On average students produced 4.3 exercises per text and the number of exercises per student ranged from 3 to 6.

The students’ perception of the effects of peer-learning can be summarized as follows. Twelve out of fifteen students believed that peer-learning made them more efficient than traditional classroom approach. Even if three students did not consider peer-learning as more efficient, all but one student agreed that this approach not only enabled them to practice their structural knowledge but also facilitated the acquisition of new professional content. Furthermore, eleven students were of the opinion that their autonomous engagement in preparing the material helped them acquire it, while three students were undecided and only one student disagreed. Finally, five students had no opinion and eight out of fifteen students agreed that peer-learning relieved the emotional pressure one might feel when talking in front of a larger group or directly with a teacher.

Classroom observation confirmed that students were indeed rather efficient in dealing with professional texts and academic assignments. In a traditional classroom we would not expect them to be able to process three articles with the accompanying exercises and the related discussion in a 90-minute session. It must, however, be noted that the depth of their engagement was not measured and the students were allowed considerable autonomy in deciding what qualified as a completed task.

As regards the most prominent reasons for learning English, ten students stated that they would need English for future travel, education and career, four stated that English was presently a useful tool, and only one student was primarily motivated by liking the language. The desire to integrate into a community of native speakers was not given as the most important reason for learning English. The present study design allows us merely to establish that only a third of our sample were primarily motivated by reasons / goals which had been found to be the strongest predictors of effort. Namely, that English IS useful for learning and helps broaden horizons.
3.2. Three-year long experience

For the last three years peer-learning has been a vital element of the Business English 4 course design. Monitoring classroom developments over three generations has resulted in a number of observations. Firstly, it must be noted that the process has been characterised by a lot of fluctuation. In the first generation about forty students were involved and the teams were strongly connected involving a lot of group work, discussion, and pleasure in sharing their work with the colleagues. In the next generation, with a similar number of participants, the students were allowed to work in IT labs to make the online resources more readily available. It seemed that sitting in front of PCs distracted students from engaging in more group work and conversation. They would often just exchange the worksheets prepared at home with their colleagues and worked individually, each on their own computer. The computer, as a perceived obstacle, was then removed this year but in this generation the group dynamics were not improved. The teams were not well tied together and often the students joined different teams if their team members were absent. Although this should not necessarily influence the learning outcomes it was obvious that changing teams meant adjusting to new ways of information exchange, which then resulted in more individual interaction with the prepared materials rather than in a group interaction with the team members. Teams with weaker team dynamics required more teacher guidance and more encouragement to get involved in some conversational exchange.

A problem that has been equally present in all three generations is the one of the final comparison, drawing conclusions, and generalising about the topic illustrated by the selected articles. Since this was the major objective and outcome of the learning process in this semester and the basis for the assessment at the final exam, the class teacher had to put additional effort in “showing the way”.

4. DISCUSSION

In designing Business English 4 course, we aimed to turn students into more active participants of the learning process rather than to satisfy students’ current, particular needs. In other words, we recognized the distinction between student-centred and learner-centred instruction as proposed by Weimer (2012) and opted for the latter. According to Weimer (2012), learner-centred approach should actively engage students in the hard work of learning and encourage collaboration and reflection about the content and process of learning. These favourable effects seem to be enabled through learner empowerment and explicit skill instruction, i.e. the teacher showing the way (Thanasoulas, 2000). Although the participants in our study received skill instruction and had a lot of control over learning processes, including the choice of instruction material and type of assignments, their overall reaction to learner-centred approach was neither entirely positive nor sufficiently engaged. Considering that seven out of fifteen students did not appreciate the opportunity to create their own tasks, i.e. “refashion approaches and procedures for optimal learning” (Thanasoulas, 2000), that only one student preferred preparing for classes at home to working in class, that many maintained a neutral stance to specific aspects of learner-centred instruction, and that the overwhelming majority did not enjoy taking a leadership role, it seems that the conditions in which autonomous learning occurs are not easy to create and that autonomous learning (Thanasoulas, 2000) does not invariably follow from learner-centeredness.

As regards the application of peer-learning (Topping, 2005) and cooperative learning (Johnson et al., 1998) in Business English 4 course, activities were organized to facilitate learning through collaboration and enable “learning by teaching” (Topping, 2005). Moreover, as proposed by Johnson et al. (1998), teamwork was intended to foster a positive interdependence among team members and to promote individual accountability for the tasks assigned. This type of activity was expected to lead to face-to-face promotive interaction, group processing and use of collaborative skills. In this generation, however, the students were not inclined to cooperate and engage in lively exchanges. While seven out of fifteen students preferred not to ask the presenting teammate for explanations, as many as nine preferred dealing with the tasks on their own to looking for guidance from the author of the tasks or for help from other teammates. Previous generations did not exhibit this kind of reservation with respect to collaboration. However, both the students and the instructor agreed that peer-
learning was more efficient than traditional classroom approach as it allowed them to accomplish more tasks in the same period of time and to practice structural knowledge and acquire professional content. Furthermore, learner autonomy was considered to be conducive to knowledge acquisition while peer-learning relieved the emotional pressure which characterizes traditional classrooms.

All in all, this generation of students seems to have taken a rather laid-back, passive stance to the course. Their reluctance to get actively involved, to take responsibility, engage in collaboration and invest effort in critical thinking, summarizing and generalizing may be explained by a learned helplessness, i.e. a strong inclination to rely on the teacher to provide not only guidance, but also bite-size information, which is a frequent approach in the Croatian education system. At the same time, the students’ unwillingness to invest effort without reservation may also be explained by their belief that English is something they will need someday, in the future, but not now. It has been established that this kind of motivational thinking does not provide the driving force necessary to sustain the learning process (Kabalin Borenić, 2013; Ushioda, 2001).

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it can be said that this generation of students has had an average performance in the exercise of peer-learning. Overall, the students were able to produce interesting exercises for classroom practice but these could too often be completed without any interaction with other colleagues. The participants have shown that they may be receptive to innovative teaching/learning procedures that allow a large amount of flexibility but also that they still require strong scaffolding and guidance to achieve the required outcomes. Moreover, a higher level of rigor needs to be maintained in order for peer-learning not to be mistaken for a laissez faire classroom. Teachers wishing to engage their class in peer-learning should know that the students with Croatian educational background might not be entirely ready for full independence and autonomy as proposed by the approach described in this paper. This does not mean giving up the attempt but adjusting it to the current situation. Among other things, students could be advised to design more exercises that encourage exchange of opinions or information with the rest of the team. These should include the exercises on note taking, summarizing, comparing, concluding, and generalizing as a lead-in to the final discussion stage that presented most problems and required most teacher intervention. Given the students’ ability to successfully imitate the models of previous learning materials, materials designers (in this case teachers) should take care of presenting a sufficient amount of this type of exercises.

Apart from learning language structures, the students appreciated learning new contents from authentic sources, which should encourage us to look for more such opportunities. However, students should be directed from the very beginning to choosing the articles that are more useful and informative for elaborating the given topic as this would facilitate the last and most difficult discussion stage.

As a follow-up to the classroom activities and as an obligatory part of the assignment, each student could also be asked to write a report or an essay on each of the four topics presented and discussed in their team. Such a task would foster collaboration and encourage students to make generalizations, comparisons and draw conclusions on the basis of team discussions. This might create the true “positive interdependence” (Slavin, 1990) and motivate the students to really join their efforts in producing something that will be subject to assessment or that they will base their oral exam on.

In terms of motivation, shifting the students’ focus from future, hypothetical benefits of learning English and helping them realize how much they can benefit from it in the present moment is likely to result in increased effort and involvement, so vitally required by autonomous learners.

A future study might be designed to involve the same learning content and two comparable groups of students, one exposed to traditional classroom instruction, the other to peer-learning. Such a study design would allow for a comparison in terms of learning outcomes and efficiency. Additionally, it would be interesting to repeatedly
engage the same group of students in peer-learning and assess/measure/observe changes in their efficiency and independence.

6. APPENDIX

QUESTIONNAIRE ON STUDENTS’ REACTIONS TO A CASE OF PEER-LEARNING

1. I am learning English because (choose the answer which describes your primary motive for learning English):
   1 - I like the Americans / English / Australians / Irish and I want to live in one of these countries
   2 - English will be useful for travelling, further education and future career
   3 - I like the English language
   4 - English is useful for learning and it helps me broaden my horizons.

2. List one more reason for learning English (not necessarily from the list above): ______________________

3. I have already attended classes designed on the basis of peer learning.
   1 2 3 4 5
   I totally disagree I disagree I neither agree nor disagree I agree I totally agree

4. Personally, I enjoy the type of instruction in which I am supposed to come to classes and bring tasks I have prepared for my colleagues at home.
   1 2 3 4 5
   I totally disagree I disagree I neither agree nor disagree I agree I totally agree

5. I was inspired by the opportunity to create tasks on my own / independently.
   1 2 3 4 5
   I totally disagree I disagree I neither agree nor disagree I agree I totally agree

6. I had no problems concentrating and listening to my colleagues’ instructions and explanations.
   1 2 3 4 5
   I totally disagree I disagree I neither agree nor disagree I agree I totally agree

7. If I had problems understanding a team-mate's presentation I (choose one answer)
   1 – stopped my colleague and asked for an explanation.
   2 – did not ask additional questions. Instead I tried to grasp the general meaning of the text.
   3 – stopped listening as I could not understand what they were saying.

8. While solving the tasks in my team we mostly (choose one answer)
   1 – worked individually, each person for himself/ herself.
   2 – took turns reading the tasks and solved them together.
   3 – relied on the author of the tasks to read the tasks to us and provide support and encouragement.
   4 - other: ______________________

9. If you chose other, please explain how you dealt with the tasks. ______________________

10. During group work I was always more concentrated on my own text and accompanying tasks than on the
text and tasks prepared by my colleagues.
    1 2 3 4 5
    I totally disagree I disagree I neither agree nor disagree I agree I totally agree
11. This approach allowed us to be more efficient than we usually are during traditional classes.

1 2 3 4 5
I totally disagree I disagree I neither agree nor disagree I agree I totally agree

12. I am satisfied with the tasks prepared by my colleagues.

1 2 3 4 5
I totally disagree I disagree I neither agree nor disagree I agree I totally agree

13. If you wish, provide a comment on the type and quality of tasks prepared by your team-mates.

____________________________

14. My experience as a learner of English (i.e. exposure to a variety of study materials) helped me to design my own tasks.

1 2 3 4 5
I totally disagree I disagree I neither agree nor disagree I agree I totally agree

15. The introductory material prepared by the course teacher for each topic helped me design my own tasks.

1 2 3 4 5
I totally disagree I disagree I neither agree nor disagree I agree I totally agree

16. How long, on average, did assignment preparation (text and tasks) take? ______________________

17. Where did you find ideas for the tasks you created? ______________________________

18. Which aids did you use to create tasks? ______________________________

19. While working on the tasks I was using on line dictionaries.

1 2 3 4 5
I totally disagree I disagree I neither agree nor disagree I agree I totally agree

20. In my team we communicated:

1 – only in English
2 – only in Croatian
3 – both in English and in Croatian


1 2 3 4 5
I totally disagree I disagree I neither agree nor disagree I agree I totally agree

22. I believe that dealing with the texts and task design autonomously enhanced the acquisition of study material.

1 2 3 4 5
I totally disagree I disagree I neither agree nor disagree I agree I totally agree

23. Working in a small group relieved the pressure I normally feel during communication in front of a big group or the teacher.

1 2 3 4 5
I totally disagree I disagree I neither agree nor disagree I agree I totally agree
24. I preferred working on my own at home to working with my team in class.

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25. When working in class I preferred presenting the topic and directing my team-mates to listening to colleagues and working on their tasks.

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