

Developing Collaborative Learning When Teaching TOEFL iBT Classes

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This article focuses on the use of Collaborative Learning (CL) activities in group TOEFL iBT classes. Use of CL activities can help learners to develop communication skills that are beneficial when taking the exam, and not usually available in traditional lecture and review test-based classes. The goal of CL is for students to help each other succeed academically (Candlin et al., 2010), and to help students to provide each other with the opportunity for success (Slavin, 1980). The essay focuses on three specific CL activities that can be used with grouped TOEFL iBT students to meet the demands of a group curriculum, while simultaneously enhancing individual skills for the test.

本論は、TOEFL iBTのグループ学習における協働学習(CL)の活用法に注目したものである。協働学習の活用は、学習者がコミュニケーション能力を伸ばす有益な手法だが、従来の講義形式やテスト解説を主とする授業では取り入れられていない。協働学習が目指すのは、学生が互いに助け合いアカデミックな分野における成功を修めること (Candlin et al., 2010)、そして成功のために平等な機会を与えることである (Slavin, 1980)。本論では、学習者の個別能力強化と、TOEFL iBTの授業カリキュラムに適した、グループ学習における3つの具体的な活用法を考察する。

The TOEFL iBT is not a team sport. Yet for a variety of reasons, TOEFL iBT students often work together in the classroom in the hope that individual needs will somehow be addressed by the group. Although this approach may seem problematic for exam preparation, it can have a very positive impact upon individual student development. This essay looks at the benefits of Collaborative Learning (CL) on the individual needs of iBT test takers and offers three practical CL activities that can be used in the TOEFL iBT classroom. The goal of CL is for students to help each other succeed academically (Candlin et al., 2010), and to help students provide each other with the opportunity for success (Slavin, 1980). The activities described here provide that opportunity. They focus on the use of groups to develop the types of communication targeted in the iBT test, while simultaneously supporting individual learner development for success on the test.

Collaborative Learning (CL)

Collaborative Learning is generally defined by its use of organized activities that promote learning through socially-structured exchanges of information between learners in groups, and where each learner is held accountable for his or her own learning, and is motivated to increase the learning of others (Candlin et al., 2003). CL activities are used to engage students actively in the learning process through inquiry and discussion with their peers in small groups (Davidson and Worsham, 1992). To achieve more than simply putting people in groups and asking them to work together, CL activities are based on five basic principles: (a) positive interdependence, (b) individual accountability, (c) equal participation, (d) simultaneous interaction, and (e) group processing (Candlin et al., 2003). The combination of these principles in task design promotes peer interaction and cooperation for studying academic subjects (Tuan, 2010). Each learner in a CL group actively takes part, contributes their ideas and knowledge, and creates groups that both academically and personally support each member (Candlin et al., 2003). It is expected that students working in these types of activities will be able to work with their peers and develop well-rounded language skills.

CL and the TOEFL iBT

The TOEFL iBT examines the test taker's ability to use English effectively in academic settings (ETS, 2013a). CL activities ensure that learners are experiencing a wide variety of communicative acts in the classroom: acts that link directly to the types of skills being examined in the TOEFL iBT. The iBT test itself is designed to reflect how language is really used with integrated tasks that combine more than one skill, just as in real academic settings (ETS, 2013a). It makes sense then to attempt to create the same kinds of integrated tasks when teaching the iBT. Evaluation checklists used during the iBT speaking section, refer to the importance of sustained and clear speech, or the need to sustain

responses (ETS, 2013b). These types of language skills are likely to be more effectively developed in group discussions and pair work, as opposed to the more traditional lecture-based approach.

Through the use of CL activities we can offer a learning environment where each student has the chance to be exposed to a variety of cognitively complex ideas, thus helping them to produce higher cognitive levels (Candlin et al., 2003). Slavin (1980) describes the learning outcomes and rewards of collaborative learning activities as ones that may be more effective than traditional techniques. Without the use of group activities and tasks, we revert to the world of lecture and discussion, whereas more meaningful and lasting learning occurs through personal, active engagement (Barkley et al., 2005). The advantages of collaborative learning for actively engaging students are clear when compared with more traditional methods—such as lecture and large-group discussions—in which only a few students typically can, or do, participate (Dick, 1991).

CL activities bring learners together as a team; Teams that can then work towards common learning goals in the curriculum and benefit as a result. “Cooperative learning is also said to generate higher order thinking skills, improve attitudes toward the subject, develop academic peer norms, heighten self-esteem, and increase time on task” (Candlin et al., 2003, p. 340). In iBT classes I have taught over the past year I have seen initial hesitancy towards group activities in class (established through student learning preferences stated on initial class surveys), develop over the semester into positive peer support and enthusiasm towards team activities. Learners have commented when giving feedback on the class itself that the group/pair work activities helped to build up their confidence to tackle the test itself. The benefits then to learners on an individual level can be substantial. “Research has found out that cooperative learning strategies enhance students’ academic achievement. In 67 studies of the achievement impacts of cooperative learning, 61% found greater achievement in cooperative than in traditionally taught control groups” (Tuan, 2010, p. 67). This kind of time on task seems especially appropriate for the speaking and listening elements of the test. Interactive group activities enable the learners to better understand how to respond and interact in the speaking elements of the test. CL tasks then offer learners the chance to group process information, exchange thinking, and explain how they reach a conclusion or arrive at an answer (Davidson & Worrsham, 1992).

Consider also the wealth of knowledge and experience that may already be in your classroom. Fre-

quently, TOEFL class groupings will present teachers with a wide variety of strengths and weaknesses in terms of language skills, alongside an equally wide variety of experiences, both with the test itself and with previous TOEFL classes. Realizing that our students are not exactly *blank slates* can be of great benefit to teachers when planning effective CL activities. Most learners assume that it will only be possible to learn from the teacher, and not from the group (Tuan, 2010). Therefore, it is important to be clear about the benefits of the activities and point out the ways in which the activities and group exposure are going to help them to personally improve. Research on CL in the classroom reveals generally positive effects. Dick (1991) identified 122 achievement studies in which a positive correlation was found between cooperative methods and student achievement. Davidson and Worsham (1992) also commented that group activities such as peer editing on individual writing helps to clarify learner thinking, can motivate them during each phase of the process, can improve the final product, and ensure success for all students.

Naturally CL is not the perfect answer to teaching groups or iBT teaching itself, but can be a useful tool for teachers in classroom planning for group environments where students are focused on individual performance and achievement. Perhaps CL can be seen to serve not as a replacement for lecture, discussion, or other traditional methods, but rather as a useful complement (Barkley et al., 2005). CL activities can help us to achieve some learning goals, but not all. Although the use of these kinds of activities is the underlying recommendation of this essay, it is important to note that not all learners will respond in the same way to their use. Some students will simply not like the idea.

[H]igh-ability learners complain about being held back by their slower teammates; low-ability learners complain about being discounted or ignored in group sessions; and resentments emerge when some team members fail to pull their weight. The teachers who used to experiment with Collaborative Learning in their classrooms became discouraged and reverted to the traditional teacher-centred teaching paradigm. (Tuan, 2010, p. 64)

Individual student needs and learning preferences clearly need to be taken into consideration as their use, or over-use, may have an adverse effect on individual motivation or performance. Just how and how often the activities are used will be important to overall success. Tuan (2010) warns of introducing these kinds of activities in a sudden manner. It

may be necessary to introduce the activities as part of a syllabus rather than as the whole, and to again make their benefits clear at the outset of a course to manage expectations effectively.

Classroom Activities

Activity 1: Group Voting Tools

The first activity described here involves the development of group consensus in listening section practice for the TOEFL iBT. Multi-choice listening questions are given to groups to review and discuss after listening to set conversations/lectures from practice tests. The goal of the activity is for each group to reach an agreement and present their answers for each question to the entire class. If answers differ from group to group then debates between groups can be developed and expanded upon. The voting tools (*Appendix 1*) are designed to be printed, cut out, and attached to sticks for students to hold up when voting for a specific multi-choice answer. They are used so that each group reports their answer simultaneously, ensuring that no last minute hedging or answer avoidance occurs. The activity focuses on group processing of notes made during listening, equal participation in discussion and response, a positive interdependence within the group on the answers selected, and simultaneous interaction. The learners will also be able to utilize information from any debate in regards to correct answers, and increase awareness of the types of information other learners are reporting from the listening.

- Step 1: The listening exercise is set and students are instructed to make their notes and select an answer while listening to the listening questions set as normal.
- Step 2: Students are placed into groups of 3–4 and instructed to discuss and compare their answers to the questions. They must agree on the correct answers together.
- Step 3: Groups raise their voting tool simultaneously to report their selected answers.
- Step 4: The instructor tallies the votes and invites groups that differ to rationalize their choice, opening the class up to debate before reviewing the correct answers.

The application of these tools has been very successful in the group iBT classes I teach. The voting tools themselves are almost identical to the types of tools commonly used in Japanese television quiz and variety shows. They have helped put learners at ease and limited the need for long explanations on how to use them. Stu-

dents have commented that the debates and discussions resulting from the use of these tools has helped them practice giving and supporting their opinions, which in turn, has helped when taking the speaking parts of the iBT test.

Activity 2: Group Evaluation and Feedback Charts

This activity allows students to collaborate and cooperate on TOEFL iBT speaking practice questions. Pairs or small groups are instructed as to the use of the speech evaluation checklist tool (*Appendix 2*) to give positive and supportive feedback on speaking practice. This CL activity develops positive interdependence between learners, ensures equal participation, simultaneous interaction, and individual accountability for the feedback given. The activity also improves awareness of the types of responses TOEFL iBT testers are looking for.

- Step 1: The teacher reviews the speaking criteria as noted on the checklist and explains how they are used.
- Step 2: Students are given a speaking task (e.g., Personal experience question).
- Step 3: Students are given the set time to prepare (e.g., 15 seconds).
- Step 4: Students pair up and make their speeches (e.g., timed at 45 seconds).
- Step 5: Students that are listening check the elements they hear and give feedback as appropriate.
- Step 6: (Optional) The teacher reviews with the whole class the kinds of feedback being given and what he/she overheard.

The students I have taught have tended to be a little wary of giving each other feedback in class. There is always hesitation as they do not want to give anyone negative feedback that might impact upon the overall mood and atmosphere of the class. For that reason the checklists are designed to focus on the positives, the things that the students have done well. This needs to be stressed when introducing them for use. Once the charts have been used a number of times, students generally slip into the habit of praising each other for what was included, and leaving the rest unsaid, or to be covered by the teacher. Student feedback on the use of these tools has been positive, with many commenting that they like the structured focus that it gives to their speaking tasks, and that it helps to make pair work and time working without direct teacher instruction more meaningful.

Activity 3: Pair to Group to Class – TOEFL iBT Speaking Section

In this activity, students work in ever increasing group sizes to discuss, debate, and agree on how they would answer set TOEFL iBT speaking questions. Each time the groups combine, students are able to repeat their responses, gain further feedback, re-formulate wording as necessary, and develop their response as a group. The CL activity involves group processing and interdependence when working on agreed responses, individual accountability, and high levels of participation. This activity also offers practice with the kind of logical processing required in the answers they must give during the iBT test.

- Step 1: Students pair up and are set the same speaking question. They are given the allotted time to prepare individually, then must present their speeches to each other.
- Step 2: Students then discuss their presentations and work together to create one version of their answer.
- Step 3: The groups are expanded/combined with others and each pair presents their previous versions to the new group.
- Step 4: Students then discuss their presentations and work together to create one version of their answer.
- Step 5: The groups are expanded/combined once more and each part of the new group presents their previous versions to the new group.
- Step 6: Each large group presents their answer to the class.

Student feedback on the use of this type of activity has also been very positive. Students that have been lower in confidence with the speaking element of the iBT test have benefitted from working with more experienced and confident speakers. As they create the answers as a group, they tend to have more confidence in their responses than when they do this individually.

Conclusion

The TOEFL iBT evaluates individual performance in reading, writing, listening, and speaking. However, test makers do not comment on how these skills should be taught. Although TOEFL iBT is a test of individual ability, more and more teachers are experimenting with group preparation. Group classes do not necessarily mean that individual performance cannot be targeted or improved upon, and CL based activities are one tool that we as

teachers can use to develop individual performance. CL activities actually enhance the overall abilities of our learners and match skills that the iBT test itself targets. Using them in class situations such as these can help teachers to manage groups, offer variety in task approach, and offer meaningful practice that benefits each individual learner in the class. Naturally, the techniques suggested here represent only a small sample of the wide variety of CL techniques that could be employed in a TOEFL iBT class, or indeed in any group learning situation.

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