

Implementing Collaborative Learning to Promote Inference-Making in a Reading Strategy Course in English

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Abstract

This paper reports on the findings of a research project intended to promote collaborative learning and inference-making skills among students from majors other than English at the University of Costa Rica. Given that making inferences are both an important reading comprehension strategy and a challenge mental process for most students (Attaprechakul, 2013; Irrazábal & Saux, 2005), students need to be taught the necessary steps to make inferences, the difference between explicit ideas and inferences, and what an inference is not. A critical reader should be able to make various types of inferences as he or she reads (Basaraba, Yovanoff, Alonzo, & Tindal; 2012; Nation, 2009). Still, making inferences is a difficult task for most readers even in their native language, not to mention the cognitive challenge of making inferences in a foreign language they are learning (Bernhardt, 2011;

Birch, 2011). Therefore, the authors planned a strategy to train their English reading students to make better inferences, resorting to collaborative work, whose benefits have been widely demonstrated (Bölükbas, Keskin, & Polat, 2011; Khan & Ahmad, 2014; Zarei, 2012). The strategy consisted of different stages. First, the students were given an anonymous questionnaire to inquire about their preconceptions about inferences. Then, as a warm-up, a video containing mimicry was projected for the student to make inferences about the events being depicted. After that, the students were told to get in groups of three and were instructed to work collaboratively to make inferences about each of the paragraphs of a reading they were given. They were also instructed to work collaboratively to come to agreement about the inferences to be made. Then, the students were told to exchange their inferences with another group to receive criticism. After that, the inferences were checked on the board with the whole class to see which inferences were correct. During the inference-making activity, the professors observed the students and took notes using an instrument designed for this purpose. At the end of the activity, the students were given an anonymous questionnaire to assess the materials and instruction provided in the activity. The preliminary results indicate that many students fail to see the difference between paraphrasing and making inferences even though they can clearly define what an inference is. After the implementation of the activity, most students concurred that they feel more confident about making inferences in English and saw the value of the instruction given. Most students said in the questionnaire that working collaboratively was a good idea to promote discussion and clarify ideas before checking the inferences with the whole class.

Keywords: reading comprehension, reading strategies, inferences, English as a foreign language

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