The Effect of Study Partners on Developing Positive Attitudes for Learning English in an EFL Class: The Guy next to me

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About my study...

This action research study aimed to investigate and evaluate the implementation of a peer-based, collaborative learning tool “The Guy next to me” in a higher education EFL classroom to help students change their negative attitudes towards learning English. Participants were 16 EFL students at School of Foreign Languages (SFL), Cukurova University in Turkey. The data was collected through Language Learning Attitudes Questionnaire, the teacher’s journal entries, students’ learning logs, individual interviews with students and records of students’ attendance and the teacher’s assessments.

The study found that there was a promising change in the negative attitudes of the students towards learning English after the eight weeks of implementation of the tool. Students’ and the teacher’s reflections also confirmed that the students benefited from “the Guy next to me” in terms of improving their English, self-esteem, interpersonal skills, reflection, collaboration, trust and taking responsibility for their own learning. Based on the research findings some reflections were finally presented.

How I met my students...

At the beginning of the school year when I was assigned to teach this class and met my new students, honestly, I felt a bit disappointed not to meet the most motivated and well-behaving students. They were a group of 16 students who I gathered not fully aware of why they were in the class and what they were doing. The medium of instruction at their departments was Turkish and to them learning English was not compulsory academically. According to the program, they had 20 hours of English to learn weekly, ten of which fell to my teaching load. Their other teacher was also teaching 10 hours to this class. However, hopeless to say, he sounded a bit bum-out about this group of students depending on his unsatisfactory experience from the previous years. Since it was my first time teaching to this group of students, I wanted to live my own experience and try my best. Unfortunately, he seemed right. The students looked disinterested, had no class materials, shy, aimless, in short as stated, lacked enthusiasm toward being in class let alone learning English. I wanted to enjoy my teaching and their learning.

Thinking about all these problems I observed in my class, I informed the students to change their negative attitudes towards learning English and become more enthusiastic learners while learning English in my classes. To do this I decided to incorporate ‘The Guy next to me: Study Partners’ technique as a teaching tool into our classroom practice.

Research Question

What happens to my students’ negative attitudes toward learning English when I implement ‘Study Partners: The Guy next to me’ as a teaching tool in my classroom?

Action Plan

- Observed individual students and the whole class while teaching them.
- Asked the students to write personal letters to me telling about their personalities, likes, dislikes, feelings about learning a language to know them better.
- To diagnose what I felt regarding my challenge, found a good scale on the internet immediately and translated into Turkish (see Appendix A). Then, I asked the students to answer the questions sincerely. Interpreted the results.

Data Collection Tools

- Language Learning Attitudes Questionnaire
- My Journal Entries
- Students’ Learning Logs
- Individual Informal Interviews with Students
- Teacher Assessments and Attendance

The Lucky One

While I was watching a film on DVD, The Lucky One (2012), I was inspired by a scene, actually, what two characters in the film was talking about.

Logan: What if I screw up?

I need you to be the guy next to me. We watch each other’s backs. You don’t worry about yourself. You think about the guy next to you.

The Guy next to me

- Based on collaborative, mainly peer learning principles
- Students call each other “study partner” and learn with each other.
- How to develop skills needed to succeed in doing pair work activities, self-reflection, how to write in a learning log, self and peer assessment are revised
- Pairs are assigned randomly
- A project title whose conditions covers the grammar and vocabulary items learnt that day is assigned weekly.
- Students are expected to present their study in class in five minutes each week, hand in their self and peer evaluations, be assessed both by their partner’s teacher and the course teacher’s lesson.
- Pairs are responsible from each other’s progress in learning English

Implementation of the Action

It took 8 weeks to set the right scene to start implementing “Study Partners: The Guy next to me”-my action of this research. During this time:
- I made use of the personal letters I asked the students to write to me, to know and understand them better, keep on observing the students especially in terms of the negative attitudes they display in class concerning learning English during the time we spent in the classroom.
- I handed out the Learning Attitudes Questionnaire to diagnose their attitudes toward learning a language, evaluated results and tried to plan and teach my lessons accordingly.
- I tried to ensure my genuine interest in their learning motivation by organizing a classroom party, spending extra time for tea/coffee together in the school yard, in my office, offering help and being available whenever they asked as much as possible, opening a class page on Facebook and asking for their contribution
- I tried to raise my students’ awareness about the advantages of knowing an international language like English both for their personal and future professional lives by talking to them as a class and in person, told them about my personal experiences and showed them YouTube videos of England, America as if we were visiting those countries as a class, asking them how it would feel and get their ideas.

Observing the Action

Results...

Language Learning Attitudes Questionnaire

Pre and post-study questionnaire results indicated a positive change concerning language attitudes in terms of self-image, inhibition, role-taking, ego permeability and tolerance of ambiguity after the eight weeks period of my implementation of the tool “Study Partners: The Guy next to me”, (see Figure 1).