SOME COLLEGE STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF COLLABORATIVE LEARNING MODE

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چکیده:

این تحقیق به بحث ومطالعه در باره دیدگاهها و بینش ۱۲۰ نفر از دانشجویان دانشگاه الزهرا ، در خصوص تجاربشان از انواع روشهای یادگیری می پردازد و بویژه بینش آنان را از «فراگیری گروهی» که شامل بحث و تبادل نظر در گروههای کوچك است، مورد بررسی قرار می دهد.

این تحقیق همچنین رابطه کلاس و لذت یادگیری، ارزشهای یادگیری و رضایت حاصل از آن را بر اساس امکانات هر یك از شیوه های یادگیری مورد بحث قرار داده و نتیجه حاصل از این بررسی را چنین بیان می کند که مدرسین و سایر مسوولان آموزشی باید تصور دانشجویان را از یادگیری وسعت بخشیده و ذهن آنان را متوجه اهمیت بحث و گفتگو نمایند.

Background and rationale

Reading and teacher talk have been widely used for decades in classrooms at all levels as the primary means for teaching and learning new information. Student talk has traditionally been discouraged in classrooms; students are typically encouraged to talk only in response to teacher questions. Recently, the social nature of learning has been emphasized. Interaction among students and teacher is being recognized as crucial to promote learning.

Vygotsky's work (1962) stressed that people need support from a

more experienced individual to learn. He wrote of a learner's zone of proximal development in which learning takes place. He said that for learner to go beyond their present state of development to more advanced state, interaction with an adult or more experienced peer is essential. To take learners beyond their present state of development into their zone of proximal development, they need to interact; they need to talk .

Studies of classroom practice (DES. 1990; Hedges, Giaconia and Gage, 1982) have clearly demonstrated that learning is maximized when a diversity of teaching methods is used. The decision to use any of the three basic modes of classroom instruction- whole class,group, and individual- is not simply a question of mathematical proportion, but of "fitness for purpose" (DES. 1992).

Pedagogic studies have also pointed to the importance of cooperation, collaboration, discussion/verbal interaction and group work, thus confirming the social nature of human learning (DES. 1975,1982). In the programs of study it is stated that "pupils should be taught to discuss their ideas, plans and progress with each other, and should work individually and in groups", while another study on classroom practice (DES. 1990c) states that "activities should be balanced between different modes of learning: doing, observing, talking and listening, discussing with other pupils, reflecting, drafting, reading and writing".

Cooperataive learning is a subset of group work methods. Long (1990) cites five benefits of group activities in comparison with teacher-fronted whole class instruction: increased quantity of student's language use; enhanced quality of the language students use- the range of functions ; more opportunity to individualized instruction; a less threatening environment in which to use language; and greater motivation for learning.

Cooperative learning encourages learners to apply several strategies commonly associated with effective instructional design, such as active construction of knowledge and personal interpretation of information (Merrill, 1991). Furthermore, during cooperative learning, students are likely to be actively and successfully involved in learning for a greater proportion of the time allocated to a particular activity, and this enhanced use of academic learning time is likely to lead to improved learning (Berliner, 1984; Caldwell, Huitt, & Graeber, 1982).

There are also many examples of cooperative learning at college level (Johnson & Johnson, 1991). For example , Rau & Heyl (1990)

have described strategies for establishing a cooperative learning environment in college classrooms. They found that their students both enjoyed the experience and scored higher than a traditional group on achievement tests.

Roychoudhury and Roth (1992) suggest that collaborative learning environments have a number of benefits beyond achievement. Nattiv, Winitzky, and Drickey (1991) postulate that some, perhaps all, of the advantages of cooperative learning in elementary and secondary school settings apply to university course work, yet D. Johnson, Jonson : Holubec, and Roy (1984) report that cooperative learning is not used in most teacher education programs. Preservice teachers should study the cooperative group ideology and experience group process to appreciate this method of learning. They have no forum for implementation of practices other than their imaginations. They are being asked to change an institution they are struggling to understand and utilize practices that have only heard about. Once they have experienced cooperation in classrooms, the insights and ideas that result tend to be assimilated into their active teaching repertoires, because they are embeded in a matrix of emotional and personal understandings (Van Voorhis, 1991).

Why has cooperative learning not been adopted as a viable method of instruction in college classrooms, particularly in teacher education? Manera and Glockhamer (1989) maintain that college instructors believe they are using coopertive learning when they implement group activities. Many of these group activites exclusively emphasize the task, demand no interdependence among the group members, and have no way to assess the individual performances. Other researchers believe that for students to really ***learn*** a concept they must work with the concept independently. Finally, college instructors may not have had instruction in implementing cooperative groups activities and fear the results.

Some research(Galton and Williamson, 1992; Webb, 1989: Biott,1987) have investigated the contexts, processes and outcomes of exploratory talk in students' learning. They conclude that group work needs to be structured- i.e. that puplis need to know the ground rules and that they appreciate the purpose of it. Bennett and Dunne (1990) found that the nature of the task set tended to influence the nature of the talk- practical tasks or "action mode" was found to be crucial in enhancing group discussion. However, some studies of practice (Mortimore et al., 1988; Tizard et at., 1988; Alexander, 1992) show that group work and collaborative learning should be more fully

explored and exploited. Alexander, Willcocks and Kinder (1989) conclude that educationists and policy- makers have underestimated the difficulties associated with facilitating collaborative learning. There is now some albeit limited evidence that there exists a mismatch between students' (and other key people's) perception of collaborative group work and the theoretical value of such work (Tann, 1981; Jones, 1987; Hall, 1992). This obviously necessitates a clarification of the purpose of such work and the communication of these purposes to students and others concerned.

Given the emphsasis on diversity in teaching methods leading to a range of learning modes, especially collaborative learning, together with the need to quantify the extent to which the findings referred to above on pupils perceptions of cooperative learning would be upheld when a greater number of students would be surveyed, prompted the present investigation.

An assumption underpinning the study is that students' perception regarding the modes or the methods through which they are being asked to learn influence positively or negatively the effectiveness of resultant learning. This study rests on the premiss that " it is the perception, not the reality, which is crucial in determining behaviour" (Rogers, 1972, p. 56).

Methodology

A questionnaire was devised, piloted and individually administered to all students (120) in five different classrooms at Az-zahra University in the Spring term of 1996. Since a substantial amount of information was required across a large number of students, a questionnaire was considered an appropriate means of collecting the data. The courses and their students were selected for the practical reasons that student teachers were available to complete the questionnaire. These students were briefed in advance regarding the aims of the study. The classes did not vary greatly, either in size or in terms of educational background-they all had passed university enterance examination, and they all were preservice EFL teachers. The students' age ranged roughly from 20 to 29 years.

A combination of closed and open questions was used to elicit students' perceptions on their enjoyment, learning value, satisfaction regarding provision of and their participation in a range of learning modes which are used to varying degrees in the classrooms. The data were analysed using SPSSx.

Analysis of the results

Table 1 categorizes students on the basis of their reported enjoyment of eight learning modes. Three options for each mode were given: one positive ("I enjoy this way of learning"), one indeterminate ("I think it is ok") and one negative ("I do not enjoy this way") .It also offers data on the perceived learning value of these same modes. Again, three options were provided for each item: "I learn a lot", "I learn some" and "I learn a little". Finally, students' perceptions regarding their satisfaction with the current provision of these learning modes were sought, and these are also presented in Table 1 . The three options given were: "I feel I get too much of this way", "I feel I get just the right amount" and "I feel I don't get enough of this way".

Watching TV/video is the most highly rated learning mode in terms of enjoyment- 78 per cent of the sample enjoy this mode, while only two per cet do not . The great majority of students (69per cent) also enjoy doing practical work, such as making something with two or three others, while most of the remainder consider this "ok" . It is noteworthy that these two most popular modes of learning contrast with each other in so far as one provides "hands-on" experience, while the other facilitates reception learning . However these items do not fare as high on the learning factor as they do on the enjoyment one: 55 and 58 per cent of students respectively claimed that they learn a lot from these modes, while the remainder learn some or a little . Thus what is enjoyable for students is not necessarily perceived as of high learning potential.

More than half the sample (56 per cent) enjoy listening to the teacher explaining to the class and asking the class questions, and almost one-third considered this mode "ok". This item is more highly rated on the learning factor, with 60 per cent claiming to learn a lot from it. It is clear therefore that students enjoy and learn a lot from both discovery and reception oriented learning modes. And do not opt for the former to the exclusion of the latter. It would be wrong to conclude that these respondents enjoy passive learning since whole class teaching and TV/video watching can, like all modes, facilitate active intellectual involvement.The findings also show that over half the students rate the following highly in terms of enjoyment: individual help from the teacher/talking to the teacher on your own about your work (60 per cent), and writing a story/making notes (58 per cent), while one-third rate these modes as "ok" . It is interesting that these latter items, althogh highly rated on the enjoyment factor, are even more highly rated on the learning factor. Similarly, reading

about someting, say, the topic, is enjoyed by 39 per cent and not enjoyed by 10 per cent while the corresponding statistics for the learning factor are 58 and 7 per cent. Thus one gets the impression that at least in the case of some students, perception of what counts as enjoyable learning modes do not equate with perceptions of what counts as high in learning value.

Considerably less highly rated on the enjoyment factor are whole-class discussion "where you give your ideas and you listen to others giving theirs" and small-group discussion "where you give your ideas and you listen to others giving theirs": only 34 and 35 per cent respectively claimed to enjoy these ways of learning, while roughly one-fifth reported that they do not enjoy these two methods. The learning potential of these two modes is not highly regarded either: less than half (47 per cent) claimed that to learn a lot from whole-class discussion, while 15 per cent claimed to learn only a little; the picture for small-group discussion is even more dismal, with only 39 per cent reporting that they learn a lot form this way of learning, while almost one-fifth said they learn a little. Relative to other modes listed, these two modes exhibit the lowest incidence both in terms of high enjoyment value and high learning value. These findings are broadly in keeping with Jones's research (1987) . If the results of this study are representative of students more generally it would seem that the current high profile of talk and discussion in the research is not reflected in students' attitudes.

TABLE 1 Student perceptions of learning modes

	Enjoyment *			Learning value **			Satisfaction ***		
Learning mode	'I enjoy this way'	'I think it's OK'	'I don't enjoy this way'	'I learn a lot'	'I learn some'	'I learn a littel'	'I get too much of this way'	'I get just the right amount'	'I do not get enough of this way'
N=120	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Reading about something, say, the topic	39	51	10	58	35	7	30	60	10
Doing practical work with 2 or 3 others eg., making something together, doing a project	69	29	2	55	39	6	21	54	25
A whole-class discussion where you give your ideas and you listen to others giving theirs	34	46	20	47	38	15	30	57	13
Writing about a topic, making nots	58	30	12	62	34	4	30	60	10
A small-group discussion where you give your ideas and you listen to others giving theirs	35	46	19	39	43	18	29	51	20
Listening to the teacher explaining to the class and asking the class questions	56	29	14	60	30	10	29	55	16
Individual help: talking to the teacher on your own about your work	60	30	10	61	29	9	25	65	10
Watching program on TV/ video	78	20	2	58	32	10	30	50	20

* **see Figure 1**
** **see Figure 2**
*** **see Figure 3**

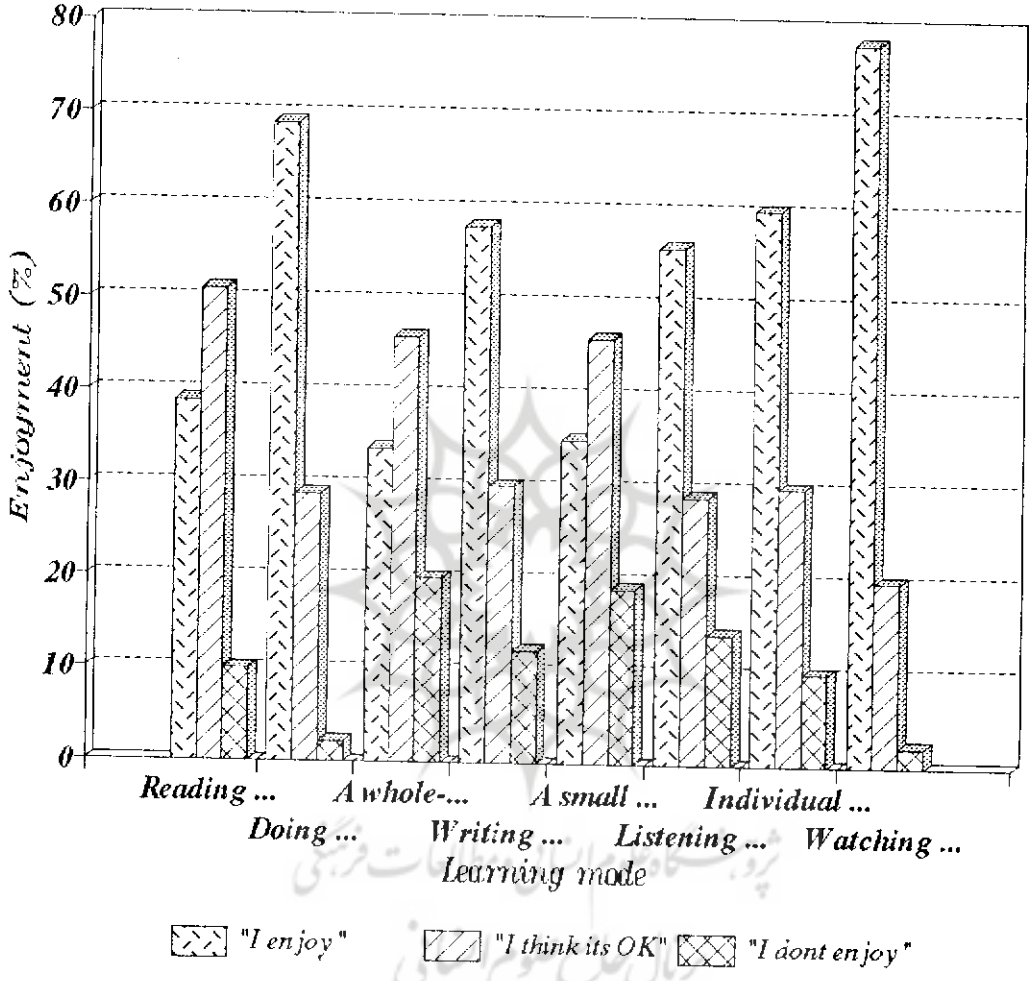

Figure 1 *Enjoyment (%)*

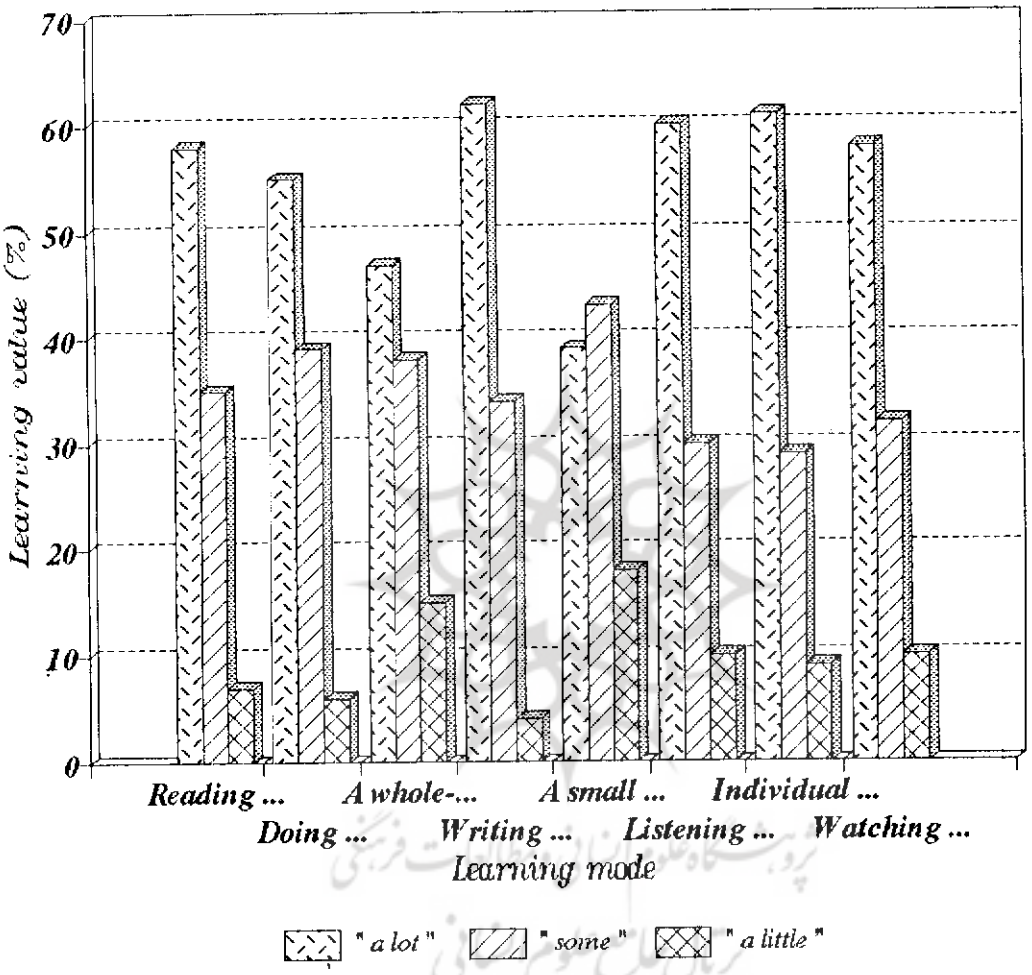

Figure 2 *Learning value (%)*

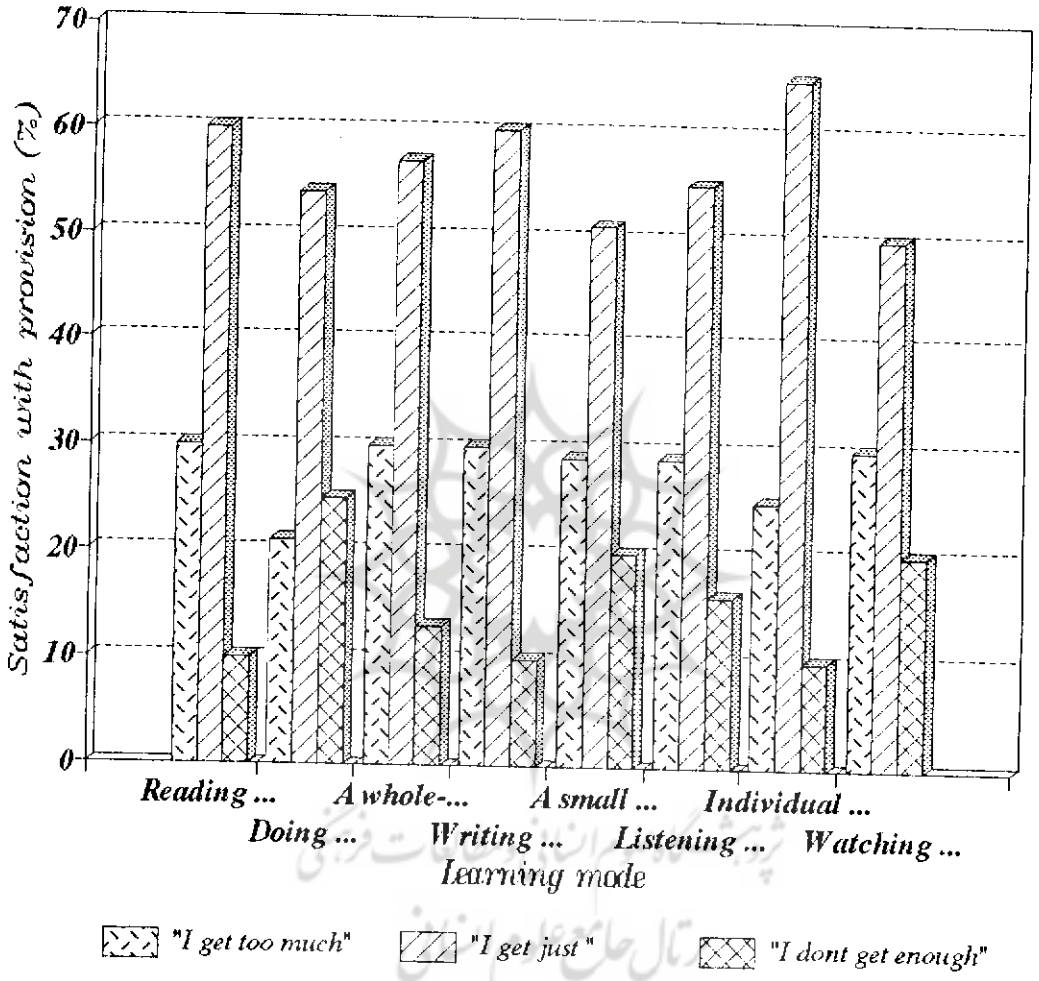

Figure 3 *Satisfaction with provision (%)*

Why this is so is not entirely explicable from these data, although valuable insights are offered in Table 2. While the great majority (94per cent) of respondents claim they can learn from discussing their ideas with the teacher , only just over half (58 per cent) say they can learn from discussing their ideas with other students. It seems therefore that a large proportion of students are not convinced of the educational value of student- student talk،there is the perception that learning through discussion in class can occur only in a situation in which the teacher is not only present, but involved in the discussion,and that students cannot learn much from each other. Thus it would seem that in order to maximaize the learning value of talk in class, teachers need, first, to recognize the possibility that students themselves may not value it sufficiently as a mode of learning, and that consequently , strategies need to be adopted which would raise the status of talk in students' minds.

TABLE 2 Student perceptions of discussion*

N= 120	Yes %	No %
Do you think you can learn from discussing your ideas with the teacher?	94	6
Do you think you can learn from discussing your ideas with other students?	58	42
In discussion do you do your fair share of talking?	66	34
Do you enjoy listening to what others have to say?	79	21
Do you say very little?	57	43

*** see Figure 4**

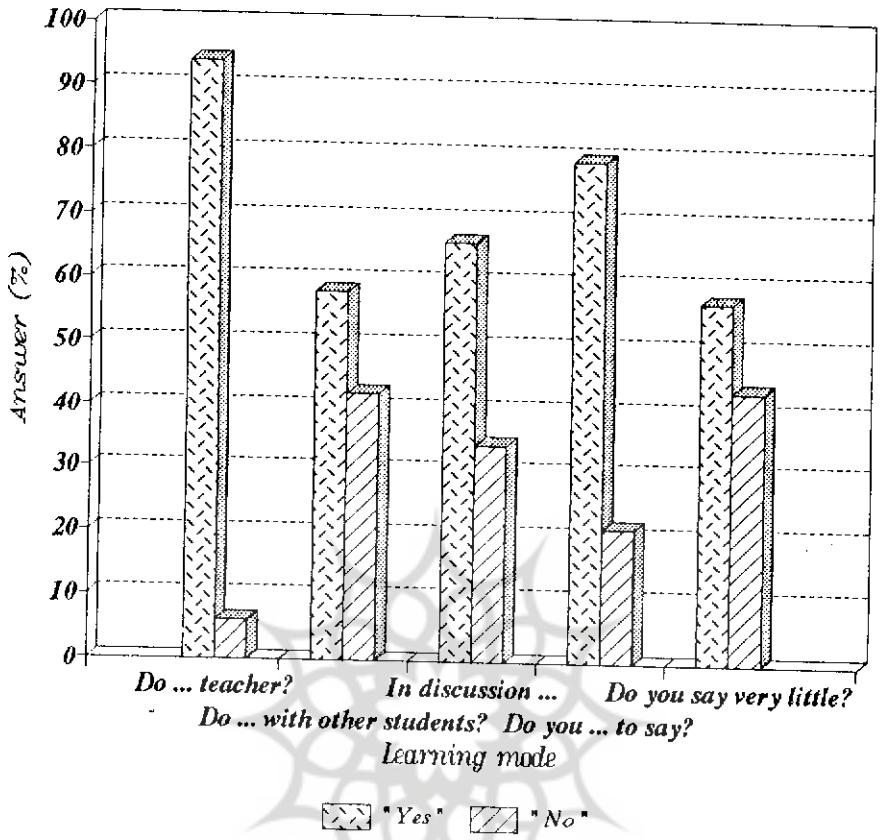

Figure 4 *Answer (%)*

Table 3 shows a representaive sample of student responses to the question: "what sort of things can you learn from discussion?" It is clear from this that students' conception of what counts as learning is predominantly a content or knowledge- oriented one , with little or no emphasis on the process of learning . They appear not to appreciate sufficiently that "talk" modes of learning are designed to achieve more than merely the completion of a set task. Inquiry skills, problem-solving skills and oracy skills, for example,were not mentioned. Process skills, such as the development of cooperative skills and a sense of responsibility towards one's learning, were not cited. Yet it is these types of competences which discussion seeks particularly to develop . In view of their notion of what constitute as "learning", it is not surprising that they place little value on the discussion mode. That they are "traditional" in their thinking in this regard should not be entirely surprising for their images of teaching, teachers and learning are gleaned not just from their schooling, but from their parents, from the media, especially television which presents the

transmission view of learning (Jones, 1987). It is therefore necessary that teachers and others involved in education strive to broaden students' definitions of learning. This would seem to be a prerequisite to any real appreciation of talk as a medium of learning. It may be, for instance, that the way talk is organised , in particular the extent to which all students have a real and meaningful opportunity to contribute to discussions, has implications for its perceived value. In this study a substantial minority (34 per cent) reported that, in discussions, they do not do their fair share of talking, while over half (57 per cent) claimed to say very little in discussions (Table 2). The results of two open ended questions, "what do you like/dislike about discussion?" add further information (Table 4). The responses under the "like" heading suggest some appreciation of the kinds of objectives teachers would seek through discussion, although the transactional view is evident again.The list under "dislike" points to some implications for classroom practice : challenging interesting topics need to be offered and there should be an emphasis on respect. This table confirms the findings above regarding one's perceived fair share of the discussion. Strategies need to be adopted to ensure that every one gets a turn and that, in opposing points of view, for instance, it is the idea and not the person that is rejected.

TABLE 3 Sample of student responses to the question: 'What sort of things can you learn from discussion?'

Things you don'nt know before
About things other people like
Things I didn't know in the past
General knowledge
What other people think
You get ideas from other people
A lot of information
You can not learn from other students

TABLE 4 Sample of student responses to the questions: 'What do you like/ dislike about discussion?'

Like	Dislike
You get a chance to talk	When the teacher says too much
You can prove your point	That you cannot learn
You share your ideas	When people say much
Getting ideas from other people	When it turns into an argument
Talking to my friends	I don't like talking
Being allowed to speak	When it gets boring

The majority of students reported that they get "just the right amount" of each of the listed learning modes, with the exception of small group discussion and watching TV/ video (Table 1). For small group, 51 per cent claimed to get just the right amount. While, in general, it would appear that most students are satisfied with the balance offered them regarding various learning modes, a substantial minority are dissatisfied with their current provision. Just 30 per cent of students indicated that they get too much of learning in the following ways: reading , writing, whole-class discussion and listening to the teacher explaining and asking questions to the class; roughly one-quarter said they get too much small-group discussion; and nearly one-fifth reported getting too much individual help from the teacher. However, 25 per cent of those surveyed noted they did not get enough opportunities to do practical work, and only 20 per cent said they did not get enough of small- group discussion.

Conclusions

Despite the high profile of oracy in the research, students in this study, are not sufficiently convinced of the learning potential of talk as a medium of learning. The main implication arising from the evidence is that students need to be made aware of the purposes of various approaches to learning. In particular, there is a need to brief them on why they are being asked to learn through discussion in small groups, so that they will value it more highly. This could involve debating with them how talk nelps learning and providing opportunities for them to reflect not only on what was learned, but on how it was learned. Future research could usefully examine the value teachers themselves place on talk and collaboration and the extent to which this is associated with their students' attitudes.

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