Co-operative Learning In Multicultural groups: how co-operative is it?[1]

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'Co-operative Learning In Multicultural groups' (CLIM) is quite popular in Flemish primary schools. CLIM projects are a didactic tool or set of strategies used for the enhancement of intercultural education. The projects are a means to promote equal participation in interaction and consequently allow equal access to learning. This small quantitative and qualitative classroom study addresses some of CLIM's basic assumptions concerning social and academic participation in student interaction. First, we will introduce CLIM, its theoretical principles and didactic strategies. The research questions and design are addressed next, followed by the main results of the quantitative analyses. The conclusions of the qualitative analyses of the social and academic participation of the students are presented next. Finally, the role of the teacher is discussed.

1 Introducing CLIM

1.1 CLIM and intercultural education

'Co-operative Learning In Multicultural groups' (CLIM), a Flemish variant of Complex Instruction (see Cohen & Lotan 1997), was introduced as a type of project learning in Flemish primary schools in 1995. The Centre of Intercultural Education uses CLIM projects as a means of giving shape to intercultural education[2] because in CLIM pupils work together in heterogeneous groups dealing with diversity in interaction.

CLIM units link intercultural education with academic content learning and language learning through the key concept of interaction. Interaction is critical to the learning process (De Corte 1998, Cohen, Lotan & Holthuis 1997: 33). Equal participation of all pupils in classroom or group interaction is seen as a necessary condition to provide equal access to academic content learning. Co-operative learning is seen as an effective way to reach equal participation (Cohen 1994, Slavin 1990). But even in co-operative learning the status of a pupil in a group often determines his participation in the interaction[3]. That's why treating status problems, that is weakening the relationship between status and participation, is seen as very important in Complex Instruction, as well as in CLIM (Cohen & Lotan 1997). This is done through multiple-abilities orientation and assigning competence to low-status pupils. Moreover, CLIM intends to use the diversity of a student group as a positive and powerful source to enhance interaction and learning (Paelman 2001).

1.2 CLIM and language learning[4]

Participation in interaction is seen as crucial to language learning (Long 1996). From an interactionist perspective: "language learning is assisted through the social

interaction of learners and their interlocutors, particularly when they negotiate toward mutual comprehension of each other's message meaning" (Pica, Kanagy & Falodun 1993: 11).[5] According to Pica, Kanagy & Falodun (1993) most classroom activities are not an efficient means to assist language learning in the classroom as they do not guarantee conditions for negotiated interaction in which learners can take an active role. Cohen (1994) explores the conditions for productive small groups, conditions that form the basis of CLIM. Still Pica, Kanagy & Falodun (1993) refer to the possible discrepancy between task expectations and the tasks in action. Foster's study (1998) confirms this problem and points out that individual learners may behave very differently during group tasks.

1.3 CLIM principles

In order to achieve equal participation and equal access to learning CLIM projects are developed following certain principles. Central CLIM principles include intellectually challenging and open-ended tasks that evolve around a central concept (conceptual, academic content learning). They also rely on multiple-abilities so that each individual brings different abilities, problem-solving strategies and experiences to the task consequently providing opportunities for equal participation of all pupils in the interaction. CLIM projects require a classroom management system using activity cards that allow pupils to decide for themselves what and how they are to do their work, co-operative norms, student roles and a non-traditional teacher role. The teacher observes while the pupils perform the tasks, gives feedback and assigns competence after the pupils have presented their tasks. These principles force the teacher to take on a non-traditional role, i.e. to relinquish control and delegate authority to the pupils. All these principles are claimed to achieve equal participation as well as to promote the intercultural competence of the pupils and the teacher[6].

1.4 An example: The environment, do we cope?

The CLIM unit *The environment, do we cope?* was developed for the 5th and 6th grade (10-12 years old) of primary school. It contains an introduction (brainstorm about the environment and discussion of pupils' rubbish lists), five rotating activities of about 45 minutes consisting of an A-activity and a B-activity[7] and a wrap-up activity (creating a newspaper that includes an ecological action plan). The A-activity is a preparatory activity, providing the pupils with the input they need to engage in the B-activity. This B-activity is an open-ended task, both in process as in outcome, in which pupils can use their own experiences and knowledge of the world to bring the task to a satisfactory result. This result is presented to the classroom and the teacher and the other pupils give feedback. In the next rotation another group of pupils will do the same activity, bearing in mind the work completed by the previous group. Participating in the activities pupils have to follow certain co-operative rules or norms (e.g. *Everybody helps* or *Give reasons for your ideas and discuss lots of different ideas*) and roles (e.g. leader, materials manager, …) of efficient and effective group work, in order to ensure equal participation of all pupils.

1.5 **CLIM in the classroom**

Teacher and pupils reactions to the Flemish CLIM-units have been enthusiastic (Paelman 1998). According to teachers, pupils talk, discuss and differ in opinion much more than is usually observed in the classroom. They readily assume their