Utilizing Group Work Effectively in the English Language Classroom

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Among various teaching methodologies, cooperative learning has been said to be one of the most effective methods. Cooperative learning involves small teams working together towards a group task in which each member is individually accountable for part of an outcome that cannot be completed unless the members work together (Dumas, 2002; Johnson & Johnson, 1994). Though cooperative learning encompasses a much greater scope of theory and practice, this study focuses on the implementation of one aspect—group work.

English teachers often encounter frustrations when conducting group work. Examples include, but are not limited to situations where: students fail to complete their share, causing the whole group to produce incomplete projects; students lack social skills to work with others resulting in groups breaking apart; or, students are unwilling to use the target language so that the native language dominates the classroom. In general, these situations are the results of ineffective group work planning. In this paper the author aims to share some of her studies and personal teaching experiences with group work and offer them as a ready reference for employing group activities in an English classroom.

Practicing Cooperative Learning By Group Work

In a cooperative classroom, students are encouraged and instructed to cooperate and communicate with others, and help each other in order to accomplish learning tasks efficiently (Feng, 2001; Johnson & Johnson, 1994). This task is achieved by practicing group work comprised of the following major characteristics:

1. Language learners work in groups using the target language to communicate, negotiate, and socialize. Receptive and productive skills develop simultaneously.

2. Target language is used in a meaningful context. As a result, students working in small groups tend to learn more of what is taught and retain it longer than when the same content is presented in other instructional formats (Davis, 1993).

3. Teachers serve only as facilitators and monitors while groups engage in their activities. Learning develops along with the engagement in activities.

Group work has been proven by researchers and practitioners alike to be an effective way of promoting learning motivation, enhancing performance, and lessening learners' language learning anxiety (Dumas, 2002; Kahle, 1993; Stahl, 1994). It seems to be an effective way to offer an interactive environment, which is essential to communicative language learning.

Group Work as an Effective Tool to Direct Over-sized and Low Motivation Classes

Group work is a much recommended strategy and common practice in the language learning classroom where the classes are over-sized and students' learning motivation is low. The following are among the primary reasons:

1. Increased use of target language for poorly motivated students: In circumstances where students take English courses as a requirement, as is true in many Asian Countries (such as China, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan), many students react adversely. Group work is a proven method of increasing learners' motivation (Dumas, 2002; Feng, 2001; Yahya & Huie, 2002). Through group work, students are placed in a designated society and are provided with meaningful and enjoyable incentives when using the target language to carry out group tasks. Students' motivation increases as they practice their social skills. In addition, students have ample opportunities to be actively engaged in the target language rather than passively receiving information from the instructor.

2. Increased interaction between instructors and students in large classrooms: In a big class, instructors have little time to interact with individual students. Individuals' learning styles, preferences, and motives are hardly addressed. By dividing the large class into smaller groups, instructors can better interact with each group, and pay attention to individuals' needs.

3. Provision of instruction in accordance with different language abilities: In many schools students are grouped as a class according to their academic major or school year, not language level. Students' linguistic abilities vary greatly in the same class. As teachers have to direct their teaching to a class of mixed levels, students possessing very high or very low linguistic skills often do not receive enough attention. Teachers can deal with this difficulty by employing tactical grouping strategies, which could group students according to language levels, learning preferences or other unique qualities, such as motivation or interests.

4. Creating a better environment for students to use target language: In an "English as foreign language (EFL)" environment as opposed to "English as second language (ESL)", students hardly have any input of the target language in their daily

lives. The most common input and stimulation of target language come only from the classroom, usually from the instructor alone. Group activities are an effective strategy to better accommodate students' use of the target language under an EFL environment because they offer language learners abundant opportunities to interact and communicate with their peers in the target language.

Experiences of Practicing Group Work in the English Learning Process

To maximize the effectiveness of group work, instructors need careful planning and a thorough understanding of grouping.

Planning Group Work

Group Size. Group size depends on the activity and the duration of the activity. Three basic group sizes are:

1. Whole group. Whole group activities are often used to introduce new materials and concepts to the entire class (Valentino, 2000). It is appropriate for warm-up activities at the beginning of a lesson (Shank & Terrill, 1995).

2. Pairs. These work for quick, ad hoc, and temporary discussions. Students pair-off and work on a designated task for a short period of time. For example, students may conduct interviews, where one questions and one answers. The smaller the groups are, the less intimidated the students are. Pair work gives learners greater opportunity to use the target language in a less threatening environment. When planning pair groups, pairing by ability is the dominant consideration. Similar ability pairs succeed when partners' roles are interchangeable and equally difficult. On the other hand, cross-ability pairs will work when given different roles and heavier demands are placed on the more proficient learner (Bell, 1991; Shank & Terrill, 1995).

3. Small groups. In general, experiences show that groups of three or four students, no more than five to six students maximum, work best. Groups that are larger than this decrease each member's opportunity to participate actively and increase their chance to "hide" in the group. The less skillful the group members are, the smaller the groups should be (Davis, 1993). For larger projects that last over several class periods, instructors should specify a team plan of operation and goals to be achieved. It is advisable that each group member be assigned a clearly defined role such as leader, recorder, presenter . . . etc. Furthermore, teachers need to take time to explain how each role works (Damian, 1999).

Grouping Strategies. Frequently employed grouping methods include the following:

1.   Random grouping is often used for in-class activities because of its readiness and convenience. Teachers usually group students by their seating arrangement or by serial numbers given by the school. Depending on the time available and the types of activities, instructors can also use games, competitions, or any other ways that produce groups and making grouping fun. For example, groups can be formed by learners' interests in the topics to be pursued. Randomly assigned groups, however, ignore the differences among students, such as their language level, learning styles, and abilities (Feng, 2001). It works best for competitive review activities or projects that do not take a long time.

2.   Student-selected grouping is probably the most preferred option by learners. Students often cluster with good friends. Students are more likely to participate in activities if they feel they are among friends rather than strangers (Davis, 1993), especially when they have to use a language over which they have limited control. When engaging in group work, learners feel more comfortable taking risks, making mistakes, and enjoying themselves while using the target language among friends. However, this runs the risk that groups will socialize too much and creates a situation where an "outsider" who joins this group may feel left out (Davis, 1993). Also, it is possible that stronger learners would assume the share of work for weaker ones.

3.   Instructor-formed grouping is acknowledged by most teachers as requiring the most amount of careful planning (Davis, 1993; Feng, 2001; Valdez, 1999; Valentino, 2000). When forming groups, teachers take into account students' prior achievements, level of preparation, work habits, learning preferences . . . and so forth. Because of the complexity of grouping, instructor-formed groups are usually used for large, long-term and complex projects that require many meetings, (even last a whole semester) and may consist of four to six students.

Problems and Solutions in Utilizing Group Work

Successful group work does not solely depend on the careful planning of the teacher; students' participation also plays an important role. Due to students' unwilling attitudes, either caused by lack of understanding or no experience with group work, some problems can appear during group work. The following are some problems that the author has encountered when engaging group work. Solutions follow:

1.   Learners are dissatisfied with the grouping arrangement. Teachers can go through the activity and explain why the groups are arranged this way. Give the learners reasons why they should stay in the same group. Before the task, a small discussion about group dissent and conflict resolution could prevent the breaking up of groups later on.

2.   The learners use too much native language. At the beginning of the activity, teachers should emphasize that students must use the target language in group work. The instructor then circulates around the classroom to remind learners of this rule and provides them with language assistance. The teacher can also join the group briefly to encourage and facilitate the learners' participation. The teacher may also set rules, agreed to by the class, for disciplining frequent offenders. For example, if a student is caught speaking the native language three times during the activity, he or she has to sing a song in the target language for the class.

3.   One or two group members do all the work. To avoid passive observers in group work, each group member should be assigned a clearly defined role. For example, a "leader" assigns a different job for each member; a "secretary" should take notes; and a "presenter" reports on the final conclusions reached by the group. It is a good idea from time to time to assign tasks to dissimilar learner types. For example, let the usually taciturn learner be the reporter, the noisy one be the secretary, and the shyest learner be the leader (Wheeler, 1994).

4.   Students lack the social skills needed to work with others. Some students prefer to work alone, or just do not get along with other members of the group. The teacher should encourage students to stay in group work, and at the same time assist the group by assigning them a task that would give them some sort of isolation. For example, if information collection via Internet surfing is part of the project, this type of student can take the job. It must also be realized that working as a team takes practice and some training may also be essential.

5.   The classroom is noisy and chaotic. If students do not know what exactly they are supposed to do, they may argue with each other or even shift the discussion to irrelevant chatting. It is worthwhile to spend some time at the beginning of the lesson explaining and organizing the activity. Some noise is an inevitable part of group activities, especially in a language classroom where speech is the basic element. As long as students are actively involved in the activity, this should be considered productive.

Assessment

As a language teacher, the goal is to build an environment for the learners to develop their language ability, to pass his or her knowledge about language to the learners. But for the students the goal is to fulfill a school requirement. In fact, the students care about the grading the most. Experience shows that teachers often encounter protests from students about the unfairness of group work. It is inevitable that some members do not equally contribute to the task while the whole group receives one grade. The ways to deal with this problem are:

1. Reducing group grades to account for only a small part of the final grade of the individual student, say, 10 percent or 20 percent.

2. Requesting that each student fill out a self-assessment form stating their contributions and asking students to grade themselves according to pre-set criteria given by the teacher.

3. In addition to self-assessment, teachers may also give students a chance to evaluate their peers. The evaluation can be presented by a descriptive report, a pre-designed check-box type format, a scale of percentages on performances compared with other learners, or a traditional score report on individual pre-set criteria.

When teachers grade, they can take into account the self-assessment, peer evaluation, and their own observations.

Conclusion

The employment of group activities does not mean that teachers can sit back and only do the grading. It takes preparation and planning before the classes, proactive energy during the classes, and reflection afterwards. The design and implementation of effective and productive group work requires experience and practice. Teachers can work as a team to learn from each other, provide support to each other, and exchange new and better strategies tailored to their own situations.

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