Communication Groups: Topics and Structure
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Communication groups are a viable alternative to more typical classroom procedures. My experience has shown that communication group exercises can be rewarding for both instructor and students alike.

Advantages

Communication groups offer a number of advantages. For instance, students naturally desire to communicate with each other in meaningful ways. Communication group exercises make use of this desire and provide a medium for students to develop their abilities to communicate in real life situations. Furthermore, instead of using the *text book's meanings*, a communication group uses the *participant's meanings*, as the students strive to communicate with one another.

In addition, communication groups help satisfy a basic concern of many language learners. As Stevick (1975: 131) explains, students often wonder: "How do my performance in the language and my ideas about its structure stack up against the realities of the language?" The communication group exercise helps students answer this question.

Two Key Elements

Success in using communication groups in language teaching depends on two key elements. The first is the *selection* of a topic. The second element is the *structuring* of the groups themselves. A review of these two basic, but essential elements may result in both a greater understanding of this approach and a greater likelihood of success when using it.

Selecting Topics for Communication Groups

The selection of a good topic is critical to the success of a communication exercise. First of all, the topic must be one that is of interest to the participants in the groups. The topic should also have relevance to them, so they can relate to it. It should be on a subject that promotes, rather than hinders, discussion and social interaction. The topic can't be on a personal subject, such as love, that embarrasses the students, and thus keeps them from speaking in the group. Finally, the topic needs to be within the realm of the students' understanding, and it should stretch their abilities if possible.

Another important consideration is whether a topic for group discussion should be selected before or after the communication groups are formed. The answer depends on who selects the topic. If, as part of planning the lesson, the instructor chooses the topic, selection will naturally come before group formation.

Topics can come from textbooks (there are many on the development of successful conversation groups) or from the teacher's own storehouse of imagination and experience. When the instructor chooses the topic, there is often the danger that the students may not be interested in it. This, of course, will influence their participation in the group.

An alternative (and often more effective) approach is to put the students into groups first and then have them select their own topic. This choice may be made from within the boundaries of a larger subject defined by the instructor, or there may be no limitations on their choice.

Learning from Experience

After conducting several communication group exercises with my ESL students, I concluded that student input was important in the process of topic selection. For example, I once began using a textbook exercise called "Good Conversationalists" (Dubin 1977: 14). The exercise explored the qualities of a good conversationalist and listed a number of topics. Thinking the students would be interested in the general category of cultural differences, I selected three topics for discussion: 1) transportation, 2) housing, and 3) entertainment. Although the students conversed on these topics, and completed the exercise, something was missing. Although interested in each other's cultures, the students were not adequately stimulated by the topics I had chosen. More interest, involvement, and interaction between group members was needed.

A "reflection period," an activity common to Community Language Learning, provided the solution. "By introducing a reflection period at the end of class, a teacher can improve English teaching activities without changing the methodology he is using." Paul LaForge (1980: 10) has explained: "The reflection period makes explicit the underlying motivational factors and personality variables, that foster or hinder the language learning process...." Deciding to try this, I arranged a reflection exercise after the students completed the communication group exercise, and it was very revealing. Learning of students' ideas and feelings about the exercise, I made some changes. First of all, I allowed the students to select new topics. They chose customs, countries and travel, with each of the three groups choosing its own topic. This was in accordance with Community Language Learning principles also. LaForge (1980: 7) states: "In the CLL group the responsibility for learning lies with the student. The teacher sets up an English-speaking experience for the students, but he does not select topics for discussion; the subject for discussion is the responsibility of the students themselves."

The outcome of this change was dramatic. First of all, getting the students to "invest of themselves" and choose their own topics was a successful strategy. There was a greater quality and quantity of group interaction. Interpersonal interaction was increased also since the students had a "stake" in what was going on within the group itself. Overall, I found that allowing the students to select their own topic enhanced group performance.

Structuring Communication Groups

Communication groups should not be formed haphazardly. Before structuring a conversation group, an instructor should do several things. First of all, review the composition of the class carefully. Group structure decisions will be based on the number of students, their home countries, their native language, and their levels of ability in English. Other important considerations are the similarities and differences in the personality traits of the students and how they have interacted with each other previously. After considering these factors, the instructor will have greater insight as to how to place his students within groups.

After the groups have been set up and begun operating, the instructor may find that changes need to be made. Group A may be doing better than group B because there are personality conflicts in B. Or maybe there is a gap in ability levels that inhibits communication.

Before making any change, timing is an important factor to consider. Usually it is better to allow the groups to finish before making a change in members. One rule is paramount in making changes: Don't embarrass the student! If you do, it may stifle his participation in any group that you put him in. Here again, a principle from

Community Language Learning helps smooth the change process. Stevick (1976: 267) emphasizes "the importance of communicating nonverbally for the most part what Curran calls a counseling attitude." If the instructor is sensitive to what's happening around him, he will be able to make changes which will then benefit not only the individual student, but the whole group as well.

My experience has demonstrated the importance of teacher sensitivity to students' feelings. During the "reflection period" in the class previously mentioned, I learned that changes needed to be made in the structure of the groups as well as the topics. The feedback I received was that each group needed members from a variety of different cultures. I also learned that two large groups were more desirable than the small groups initially structured. Students found larger groups interesting because there were more members to interact with and more experiences to share. Once again, the reflection period was an excellent means for receiving feedback and then using that information to enact changes in the structure of the groups.

Conclusion

Although setting up classroom communication groups may appear to be easy, it is by no means a simple task. One challenge is selecting a topic that is interesting and relevant to students but not inhibiting or hard for them to understand. Getting students involved in the topic selection process allows them to "invest of themselves" and thus increases both motivation and participation.

Group structure should be decided only after a number of student variables have been carefully considered. Even then, however, flexibility is important. In both topic selection and group structuring, a reflection period after the communication group exercise has proven extremely beneficial.

As my experience illustrates, communication groups can be a learning experience for both instructor and student. The groups themselves can possess a life of their own as students interact with each other on an interpersonal and group basis. When a good topic is discovered and groups are properly structured and functioning well, the results can be rewarding and well worth the teacher's effort.

References

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