



Group / Pair - Based Learning: An Interactive Approach To Promote Active And Effective Learning Climate in the ESL Classroom

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Abstract

The aim of teaching English in second language pedagogy is to develop learners' proficiency in using language skills. Students come to know and use language skills more successfully not by doing exercises and studying it but by using it. However, in teacher - fronted classrooms students are deprived of many useful and motivating opportunities for learning and using language skills. Many observers of language classrooms have commented that in many teacher - fronted classrooms, students have only restricted opportunities to participate in the communicative and interactive uses of language. To improve the language learning environment, various alternative pedagogies have been suggested by researchers who emphasize the need for group and pair based learning to be one. The investigator of the present paper also carried out a single group experimental study and found group and pair work to be highly useful and helpful in ESL classroom as they provided increased opportunity for learners to interact and use language skill. Hence in the light of this, the present paper aims to discuss the nature of group and pair - based learning in the first part and reflects on the experiences of practice and outcomes in the second section.

Keywords: *alternative pedagogy, ESL classroom, group/ pair based learning, learning environment, motivation, teacher-fronted classroom.*

Introduction

Teaching English language has now moved away from a teacher- centered focus to a learner-centered and more emphasis has been on the learners. Theories of teaching are no longer based on a transmission model where teachers are at the top of the classroom hierarchy, but on a more *egalitarian, transactional model, where students learn with the help of peers in groups and pairs which is the highlight of the paper too. Since learners are the focal point to teachers, they are entrusted with the responsibility to motivate students to use and learn language skills. Use of chalk and lecture method alone is insufficient to cater the demands of the learners. Long and Porter (1985) argue that utterances which are directed at fellow learners and made comprehensible; through interactionally achieved modifications are more*



fruitful than simplified teacher speech. So the use of discussions, presentations and debates through group / pair work organized by the teacher is recommended. Group / Pair work have long been advocated as a key means of promoting both linguistic and communicative competence. Indeed, it is through this kind of interaction that researchers believe that students can be given an opportunity to interact and draw on their linguistic resources in a non- threatening situation and use them to complete different kinds of tasks.

Purpose of Group / Pair work

Group / Pair work can give all students a chance to participate and practice, so that everyone gets to listen and speak. On a practical level, group / pair work can lessen the difficulties presented by the number of unknowns on a page of any literary text. Someone else in a group would be able to supply the missing link or fill in an appropriate meaning of a crucial word, or if not, the task of doing so will become a shared one. With the group members' support and help individual learner has greater freedom to explore his / her own reactions and interpretations. It also stimulates learners to reread and interpret any piece of text material on their own. In large classrooms, this is the only way of getting all students actively involved.

Theoretical Background

Group -based learning

It is defined as students working together in a small group so that everyone can participate on a task that has been clearly assigned. Small groups of around 5 students provoke greater involvement and participation than larger groups. It allows them to do and prepare range of tasks like role play a situation, write a group story, prepare presentations or discuss an issue and come to a group decision. Group work increases language practice opportunities (Long & Porter, 1985) and that such practice is valuable since it allows learners to " create meanings with other users" (Brumfit, 1984).Group work is an effective technique for achieving certain kinds of intellectual and social learning goals. It is a strategy for solving two common classroom problems:

1. keeping students involved with their work and
2. managing instruction for students with a wide range of academic skills

Besides being a powerful tool for producing active learning and for producing simultaneous opportunities for all class members, group work increases oral language proficiency. Pica & Doughty (1985) suggests that group work can be heartily endorsed ... with regard to the amount of practice time it offers students in forming hypotheses about the target language and the opportunities it provides for enhancing development of second language fluency. A degree of optimism is in order, furthermore, for the use of group work on tasks involving a required exchange of information. Rulon & Mc Creary (1986) conclude that the participants in the small groups conferred and communicated with each other so as to arrive at an argument while the students in the teacher- fronted classes merely to be listening to a



lecture given by the teacher. Nunan (1991) also proposes that learning to speak in a foreign language will be facilitated when learners are actively engaged in attempting to communicate in groups. Jack C. Richards & Farrell in Practice Teaching : A Reflective Approach indicate that group - based learning is widely used in all forms of teaching and significantly changes the interactional dynamics of the classroom. In large classes it can help promote self-esteem, it increases student talking time and it can also increase student motivation by providing a risk free environment for language practice. However, setting up group activities poses a number of challenges as follows:

1. time - the logistics of putting students into groups can be time consuming
2. cliques - students often seat themselves in cliques by friendship and language group
3. limited language proficiency - low proficiency students may have difficulty following instructions and be intimidated if working in a group with stronger students leading them to remain silent
4. control - some teachers may feel that they are no longer in control of the class.

Successful implementation of group work involves the following considerations :

1. group size : group of four are best for ease of classroom management
2. group formation : teacher should select group members to achieve more of a heterogeneous mix that promote peer tutoring and keeps the members focused on the task
3. mixed proficiency levels : mix the groups with learners of different proficiency levels as they can help each other with different tasks
4. noise levels : one student in each group can be appointed as a noise monitor to keep the noise at acceptance levels.
5. nonparticipants : students who are unfamiliar with group based learning may be persuaded
6. unequal completion times : an additional task may be planned to be given to group who finish early
7. monitoring group performance : visit and survey each group in a class continuously to note whether they are on track and give feedback to students who go in the wrong direction in order to guide them

Advantages of group work

- It increases the amount of talking time for individual students
- It encourages broader skills of co-operation and negotiation than pair work
- It promotes learner autonomy by allowing students to make their own decisions
- It creates greater chance for students contribution

Disadvantages of group work

- It is likely to be noisy



- Sometimes students find themselves in uncongenial groups and wish they could be somewhere else
- Some students in a group may be passive whereas others may be dominant

Pair - based learning

In pair work students can practise language together, study a text and take part in information-gap activities. They can write dialogues, predict the content of reading texts or compare notes on what they have listened to or seen. Long (1983) argues that use of carefully designed pair work tasks can help learners obtain "comprehensible input". This input is obtained through the interactive negotiation that learners take part in as they complete the task. Grouping students in pairs can take into considerations ability level, language and cultural background, information flow and other factors that will facilitate a positive approach to learning.

Advantages of Pair work

Like Group work, pair work

- increases the amount of speaking time of any one student in the class
- allows students to work and interact independently without the necessary guidance of the teacher, thus promoting learner independence
- gives time for teacher to work with one or two pairs while other pairs continue working
- promotes co-operation among students and helps them to share responsibility and make decisions in pairs

Selection of learning arrangement

According to Richards (2010) selection of group work or pair work may be based on the particular type of activity chosen and a number of factors:

1. Pedagogical factor: A pair or group activity might be considered essential for a speaking task, but not necessarily for a listening task
2. Ability levels: In setting up groups, decisions must be made as to whether students of mixed ability or of similar abilities should form a group
3. The teacher's personality and individual teaching style: Some teachers like to be in control of a lesson, for example, and hence make use of whole class learning arrangements
4. The teacher's personal philosophy of teaching: A teacher may feel that students learn best when working with others and that the teacher's role is that of facilitator
5. The institutional culture: Some teaching institutions may favour particular learning arrangements. An institution that favours collaborative learning, for example, is likely to encourage teachers to use group work.
6. Cultural factors: In some cultures students expect the teacher to be in charge of the class and do not think they can learn anything useful from working with other students.

**Psychological aspects of learners in group**

Wilfred Bion (1961) states that in every group, two groups of learners are actually present: the work or task group and the basic assumption group. The aim of task group is to achieve the objective of the group that is to learn. The idea of assumption group is to centre on the basic behaviours that people use to protect themselves from the distress of being close to other people in a group. Although learners inherently like being together they are also fearful of being taken over by the group fight, pairing, dependence/ independence, one-ness, me-ness. All these psychological factors may create anxiety and lead to a result of very little interaction and participation in the learning process.

Teacher's role

Role of teacher in group/ pair - based approach is a demanding and difficult one. Though teacher's dominance is less, it is the responsibility of the teacher to start group tasks with clear instructions and a demonstration. He/ she has to check whether students have understood what they have to do or not. A teacher who follows this method of instruction must be aware that this is not just about paying attention to an individual learner whereas he/ she must pay attention to the group and the tasks used along with the individual learner. Her/ his role is multifaceted like allotting roles to learners in groups, changing the members of each group frequently so that they sit in different places and work with different students without getting boredom, generating learning and reflecting on what is happening in the group as another form of learning. On the whole, the teacher's role is that of a facilitator who provides necessary guidance to promote active learning and effective learning climate

Example of group/ pair -based learning

The following section summarizes the experiences, beliefs, practices and pedagogical knowledge gained by the investigator on implementing the group/ pair -based learning in the form of a project study. The procedures followed and experiences collected are described in a six - part format:

1. Context

The setting was a rural based Arts college located in a small town named Karaikudi of Sivaganga District in Tamilnadu, India.

The students of II B.A. English Literature (linguistically and economically backward) were the target audience/ participants. 25 students who were interested to undergo the group/ pair - based learning programme had been included in the training. The training programme was carried out over a period of 12 week. Text materials to be used in the training were selected from the prescribed syllabus to the participants of the programme and interactive/ learning activities were designed relevant to the content of the text exclusively by the investigator of the study.

2. Problem

The students of the II B.A. English Literature course for whom the investigator teaches were good at rote learning and used to traditional approach of teaching and learning. They had



been practised to a very tight teacher dominated classroom practice like listening silently to teacher's lecture on the text. Though teacher- fronted classrooms or traditional teacher - centered classrooms worked up to a point, it was insufficient to cater the demands of the learners. In fact, learners had restricted opportunities to participate in the communicative and interactive uses of language and hence had restricted opportunities for language learning. They were not exposed to think or discuss or interpret the text on their own. As a result students had less chance for language use and language learning.

3. Solution

In order to solve this problem and increase the learners' participation and interaction in the classroom, the investigator resolved to use group / pair work for creating an active learning climate. Although the selected 25 participants were not used to group / pair work based learning, they were motivated and encouraged by giving insightful suggestions and views about this model of learning. The investigator used prescribed text materials of that semester to the participants to create interest as well as to complete the topics prescribed for the examinations. 5 texts consisting 3 poems and 2 one- act plays and grammar components and idiomatic expressions were chosen to be used as content material for the study. Various learning activities relevant to the text were designed to make learners actively participate and use language skills and thereby learn the required language. Some of the activities designed and used were choral reading of a poem, mini-reading aloud, fluent oral reading, short writing tasks, jigsaw reading, oral summaries / presentations, matching , vocabulary games, etc.

4. Procedure

Students of 4/5 in group work and two in pair work were organized for promoting peer interaction and learner motivation and the members were kept focused on the activities prepared by the investigator. Most of the students seemed able and willing to share the information about the topic with their group members. But a couple of students in each group were bit reluctant to involve in the activities since they were unfamiliar to this interactive approach. In such a condition, they were instructed about the benefits of the group / pair - based learning and were persuaded to work with the higher proficiency students. Thus, learners with different proficiency levels were mixed up in groups or pairs as they could help and guide each other with different tasks. In this way, higher proficiency students were given more challenging tasks such as acting as the group reporter or as writers by taking notes about what had been discussed by the members in the group or as presenters. The discussion time differed from activity to activity based on the learners' knowledge of the topic, language proficiency, group /pair work skills, etc. the investigator of the study changed the members of each group frequently so that they sit in different places with different groups and work with different students. At the end of each discussion or the completion of each activity, groups were instructed to share their discussed answers or interpretations with other group members to check if every group had come out with same or varied points or interpretations.



Students were appreciated and encouraged for their creative answers and interpretations but were not criticized or neglected. If they were completely irrelevant and away from the text, they were supplied with some ideas. Most of the time students tried their best to come out with the required information by using the English language. In some situations students were permitted to use their mother tongue to convey their ideas. But this was not encouraged to a great extent. In this way students interacted and communicated about the tasks with each other. The investigator went around the class and monitored the group performances and provided necessary guidance and feedbacks when situation aroused. At the end of group discussions or activities questions were raised to check their comprehension level in the form of discussion and written. Audio and video texts were also used to motivate the learners. The sessions were also video recorded for further analysis. Questionnaire containing more than 15 items was prepared to analyze the students' perceptions on the impact of group/ pair work learning before and after taking up the training. They were collected and computed for further analysis.

5. Analysis and Observation

The objective is to compare the mean scores of students' response on the category ' Students Participation ' at pre and post stages. The data are analyzed with the help of correlated t-test and results are given in the following table.

Table: Mean, SD, Correlation and Correlated 't' value of the Pretest and Posttest scores on Students Participation of the Experimental group

Test	Mean	SD	r	Correlated 't' value
Pre Test	17.84	2.285	0.433	22.465**
Post Test	29.96	2.731		

****significant at 0.01 level**

From this table it is found that the correlated 't' value 22.465 is significant at 0.01 level. It reflects that the mean scores of the experimental group on Students Participation category at pre and post stages differ significantly. Thus there is a significant difference in the mean scores of experimental group on Students Participation Category at pre and post stages. Further the mean score of posttest is 29.96 which is significantly higher than the pretest value where the mean score is 17.84. It may therefore be said that the experimental students are benefited through the treatment of Group/Pair- based Learning using interactive activities especially when the performance in category wise i.e., Students Participation is considered. To conclude, it is inferred from the findings of Students Participation category in the questionnaire that the implementation of Group/Pair- based learning using interactive



activities has significantly enhanced the active interaction and participation of the experimental group. From the findings and from the information collected qualitatively, it is also observed that students were actively involved in learning the language as well as comprehending the subject matter of the text, everyone was participating in group or pair work actively and that they enjoyed doing a variety of activities in each lesson.

6. Insights

This classroom study illuminated the possibility of motivating and helping students to participate actively in group/ pair - based learning in a relaxed and non- threatening way. Through this practice, students got more opportunities to participate and use language skills which is the principal aim of ELT. Following group/ pair -based learning to traditional classroom procedures achieved its intended purpose. The arranged group of 4/5 is an effective concept than a teacher- fronted class. It was also perceived that through this kind of group / pair work activities, linguistic and communicative competence had developed. The participant - learners also commented that working in groups / pairs had proved to be fruitful and had awakened their self - confidence and self - reliance to learn the language. These reasons lead the investigator to believe that group/ pair -based learning would promote active interaction and effective learning climate.

Conclusion

In this paper the researcher has set out some of the theoretical and practical aspects of group / pair - based learning for promoting an active participation and effective learning environment. The importance of group / pair -based learning as an interactive approach is also emphasized in the paper and have provided rationale to support the ideas discussed in the paper. It is hoped that the ideas outlined here would provide some assistance and insights to teachers of English language and researchers. Like any method of teaching English, this interactive approach would also be a rewarding language learning experience to students. How best it is planned and put to use will determine the success of the students in learning and using second language.

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