

PROMINENT FACTORS AFFECTING GROUP WORK EFFICIENCY FOR EFL LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT: *This paper points out factors affecting group work efficiency. Group work is considered one of the techniques that is centrally practiced in the communicative method as well as student-centered approach. The questioning area of such a practice is that whether or not it is highly effective in learning. This study is carried out to measure three factors which are possibly not in a consensus among teachers. They are time allotted, the number of group members and types of duties given to the group to perform. Methodology used in the study is a mix of qualitative and quantitative method. A survey design is implemented to explore teachers' perceptions of group work. Data are collected by questionnaire submission to teachers in order to explore their perception on the three variables. A procedure was carried out by taking teachers' feedback in form of questionnaire to reveal their experience with group work. Results show that teachers prefer to the traditional group work formation. They give enough time for groups and extend the time to complete the tasks. They also prefer to form larger groups of 4 or 5 students.*

KEYWORDS: Group work, cooperative learning, Group work formation

INTRODUCTION

Cooperative learning came to be part and partial of modern methodology throughout the last two decades as a trend of learning. There are advantages of implementing cooperative learning in English as a second/ foreign language learning as it is proposed: increase students' talk, motivation, more relaxed atmosphere and more negotiation of meaning (Liang Mohan, & Early 1998 from Richards. J & Renandya, Willy A. 2010). It takes different forms as one of which is group work. It is one of plethora of techniques that is employed in education as general and in English teaching in particular. On the one hand, it cannot be imagined that English classrooms are without a group work activity. On the other hand, it is not an activity of putting some students together and ask them to do a task. This should not be random to show that a teacher is applying interactive strategies or to make it easier for a teacher and take a burden off his/her shoulders. Definitely, this is not the target of group work. In fact, teachers need such a practice ,since learners are different in their preferences as Lindsay and Knight mention that there are seven types of learning styles. They are visual, auditory, tactile, kinesthetic, field-independent, field-dependent and reflective. This diversity requires implementing a variety of strategies and activities to fulfill learners' needs according their preferences.

Thus group work as a cooperative activity is compatible to those learners who learn differently with individual differences in which group work is not confined to only sitting on chairs together to do some tasks.

The importance of such paper lies in finding optimal practices of group work which can be an effective method to motivate students, encourage active learning, and develop key critical-thinking, communication, and decision-making skills. But without careful planning and facilitation, it can slow students' linguistic improvement and can be a waste of time. There are suggestions to facilitate implementing group work successfully in an English learning classroom. There are success and failure factors for group work implementation and this is based on how much planning and skillful practices will be exerted. So that, , this is not as said "easy peasy task". In fact, it is a challenging effort when teachers want fruitful results and outstanding learning experience out of their activities. This study will show three significant aspects of group work which will be a triangulation of factors to be addressed. They are: time allotted for group work, types of tasks and ideal number of participants in an activity together. These factors are selected because each could lead the activity to either failure or success.

Advantages of group work

Group work has fruitful outcomes when it is planned, well prepared and frame it as a part of learning process. It can

1) Provide more opportunities to participate in case of large classes.

Nowadays in many countries, teachers suffer and complain about large number of students. For Example, in Saudi Arabia the average of class size is 33 students while in Cambodia, India, Vietnam and other Asian countries have above 40 students in class. Eastern Europe complain similarly. This obstacle is not confined to developing countries. In Sydney, the school of refugees which I attended in July 2003 also include larger than 25-student classrooms. Teachers in such case always suffer from not giving learners enough opportunities to practice the language which is essential for learning. Cooperative learning as group work is key solution to give all learners equal share of contribution simultaneously in a monitored atmosphere by a classroom teacher coaching them to push the process of learning.

2) Foster learners' responsibilities and autonomy.

Cooperative learning is a distribution of effort to some students and this gives each one specific roles to perform. This creates a sense of responsibility and autonomy, since some tasks are split into several subtasks which are related and dependent on one another. As a jigsaw, subtasks must be completed to form the whole. It pushes a student to do his/her part in order to make the whole process flow smoothly.

3) Provide feeling of contribution which motivates students to be involved more.

Johnson, & Holubec (1993) propose that cooperative learning is associated with benefits as liking for school and interethnic relations. In fact, working with others can be fun and beneficial as well though students focus on the former more than the latter. So the teacher can make the class very useful through the trick of fun atmosphere. This is also affirmed

by Ur (1996) that cooperative learning in groups can motivate students in their participation and their autonomy and independence (p. 232).

4) Provide mutual learning and student-student interaction.

Group work can provide a present source of learning that can conform to sociocultural theory. Lightbrown & Spada (2006) assert that learning is thought to occur when an individual interacts with an interlocutor within his/her zone of proximal development (ZPD). It can be inferred from this that cooperative learning provide opportunities of a social interaction within a classroom while interaction for EFL is very limited outside the classroom.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Several studies carried out to discuss and address group work and cooperative learning in term of process, affecting factors and outcomes. Brown (2007) in his book explains the process and the implementation of group work which asserts maximizing students' roles while teacher's role is minimized. He enlists the advantage of group work: GW generates interactive learning, offers an embracing affective climate and promotes learner responsibility and autonomy (p. 224-226). At the same time, he shows why we avoid using the group work activity: Students use their L1, errors will be reinforced, teachers cannot monitor all groups and some learners prefer to work alone. Horwitz (2008) relates the group work activity to oral skills and speaking activities. He asserts that using group work in speaking activity reduces anxiety because students will feel to be more comfortable talking to small groups instead of speaking in front of the whole class (p. 103). Interestingly, there are eight shapes of cooperative learning formulation in classrooms as Scrivener (1994) illustrated: They are pairs, enemy corners, opposing teams, face-to-face, panel, public meeting, buzz groups and wheels (p. 89). Moreover, he delved into the activity in its various uses such as game implementation and fun exercises. The discussion includes some useful steps of how to implement the activity. Here are some steps: 1) pre-class: Familiarize yourself with the material and activity. Prepare materials you need. 2) In class: Lead in / prepare for the activity. 3) Set up the activity. 4) Run the activity: students do the activity while you monitor and help. 5) Close the activity and invite feedback from the students. 6) Post activity: do any appropriate follow-on work. This is an ideal application of group work in which a teacher should intuitively selects an appropriate form of activity to fit learners' attitude, needs and preferences. Success in selection means success in application and ultimately success in learning process.

Research Design

Research Questions

1. Does time allotted for group work affect the efficiency of learning ?
2. Does type of activity in group work affect the efficiency of learning ?
3. Does the number of members in group affect the efficiency of learning ?

Data Collection and Sample

To examine the efficiency of group work activity implemented in Alahsa College of Technology, data are collected from 38 English teachers who responded to a questionnaire of 7 items. Teachers' perception and beliefs are important especially 90% of them have more than 10 years of experience of teaching English. Data were collected in September 2016. Participants are 38 male Saudi teachers who teach in different levels ranging from intermediate to college level. The method used in analysis is likert scale survey and averages.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Questionnaire items have been coded and converted into a numerical scale which is compatible to likert scale. It ranges from 5 (strongly agree) to 1 (strongly disagree) or from 5 (always) to 1 (never). Then averages of answers have been calculated as shown in table 1 below. Table 1 shows that teachers agree with 6 items while 1 item is answered as neutral which is considered as non-agreement. Based on results, 4 or 5 students in a group are preferred. Allotted time is enough and also more extra time could be given to students for tasks completion. Teachers think that some students depend on their peers while they may or may not use the time for personal chat. Traditional formation of groups is the dominant in the teachers' responses. Finally, Teachers feel that students are happy with group work. These views have been clearly supported with high averages. Most of them came out to be above 4 out of 5. Table 1 below can show the results with accurate averages.

Table 1. Items of questionnaire for teachers

Totally Agree = 5		Agree = 4	Neutral = 3	Disagree = 2	Totally disagree 1
Item	Mean		Equivalent		
Based on your experience, the ideal number of group is between 4 and 5	4.21		Agree		
The best formation of groups by making students sitting on chairs facing each other.	4.24		Agree		
I give groups enough time to do a task.	4.37		Agree		
I give extra time for groups when they work hard and about to finish their task.	4.27		Agree		
When my students work in groups, some students	4.421		Agree		

depend on others to do the task.		
My students take it as a chance to chat and waste time when they are in groups.	3.263	Neutral
When I tell my students to be in groups, they get excited.	3.842	Agree

In fact, results show that all teachers who are not agreeing with number of a group to be 4 or 5 assert that some students depend on others in completing a task and 75 % of these teachers are advocates of that groups of 4 or 5 can take it a chance to chat and waste time. Also results show that 50% of teachers, who are not agreeing with the traditional formation of groups, do not give extra time since adaptation of formation is important to be compatible with time allotted.

Going through the three factors and addressing each one to draw up a fine conclusion.

A) Number of students in each group

The cooperative learning requires various direction of interaction, such as students-student interaction, group interaction and teacher-students interaction. A model has been drawn for these interaction directions can be shown in figure 1.

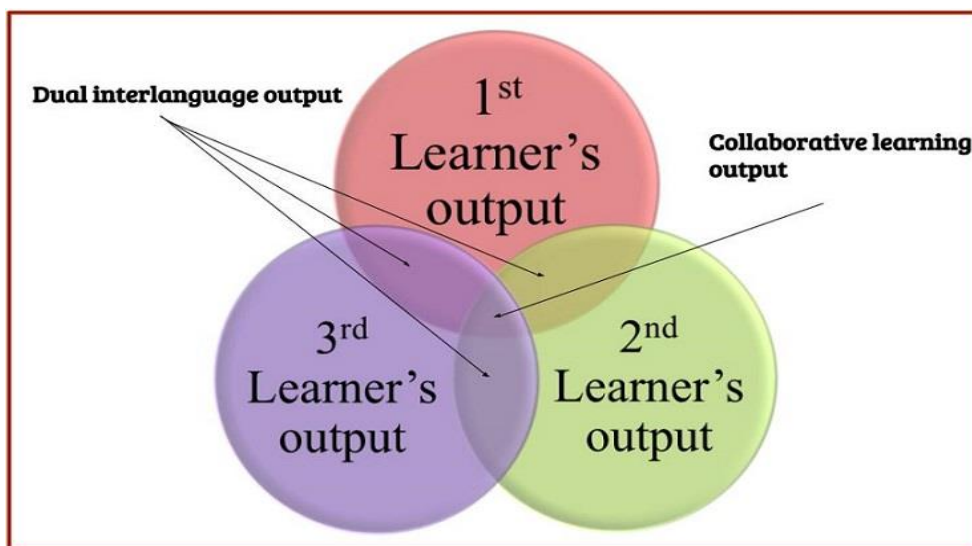


Figure 1: model of 3-member group work

Describing the relationship in the interaction, we can classify it as follows:

Two students: reciprocated flow of opinion and knowledge (active participation)
Three students: circular flow of opinion and knowledge. (building autonomy)
Four students: unorganized flow of interaction (someone might be ignored)
Five students: likely to be splitting into two small groups spontaneously. Although results support the bigger groups as 4 or 5, the smaller groups can work very effectively supporting the interaction directions. Students in smaller groups as 2 or 3 can provide more chance to talk as Richards & Renandya (2002) advocate that since it requires shorter time and each one talks while no one will be left out. In smaller groups, a teacher can manage groups more effectively and work would be more organized. In such case, there would be dual and collaborative interaction as shown in figure 1. This can create a sense of responsibility in each member since if one stops working, only two can talk and will immediately push the third to share thoughts. It is likely to say that the model in figure 1 can provide an ideal casting of the members' roles.

There is a major drawback of group work which is related to ethnographic constraints and cultural background for example Flaitz (2003) distinguishes Japanese culture in their education, "the older students get, the more individualized work is preferred" (p. 64). Unlike Saudi students who can go along with cooperation in their educational achievement. That is a convincing reason to use group work in a culture while to avoid it in another. Richards and Renandaya (2010) mention some drawbacks of group work in learning English which is dependence and heavy load on individuals who are the strong ones and this cannot be solved unless there is an organized process as follows (p. 44):

1. Assign independent duties to each member for example divide up the text into pieces and each one will take his portion
2. Then after each one is independently did his work, they start to peer reviewing and then group discussion then groups presents to class.

This happens due to the cultural background e.g Saudi culture has a trait that "I should help the others proudly" this pushes the strong students to have a concept that it is good and have to help the other members of his/her group. However in other cultures, we may not face this obstacle due to their cultural implication. In fact, in Saudi Arabia the phrase "help my group" means that I do the task for them and this is against aims of group work. There are steps to be considered to solve this obstacle as Cary (2007) suggested eliminating the unequal roles in presentation or group discussion, teacher should do the following (p. 75):

1. Change the speakers one at a time.
2. No group leader.

B) Time allotted

Time should be quite short to create out of the activity a spot of suspense. In such case, students will be excited for the next time activity. Long (1977) suggested that "the time spent on 'skill getting' language-learning activities can be reduced quite dramatically by organizing a class of learners into pairs". What Long suggested can be considered seriously since many teachers cannot predict reasons beyond discipline or boredom issues and think that it is just because the students are in a low motivational level or they are by nature break the rules of discipline. In fact, a teacher should get each one involved in something to do a task. This way students may find it interesting to work in groups. Time also is a significant factor in which it should be minimized and enough to perform 60 % of the task and they are required to complete it as a process which will be shown in figure 2 below. So cooperation is a starting phase and autonomous effort is instilled in a final phase of an activity. Time spent in group work is minimized not only for the sake of time saving, but also for attracting the students to this cooperative technique and avoiding boredom and routine.

C) Type of activities

Learning styles differ from a learner to another. Some learners achieve better with a method that is not a preference for others. Horwitz (2008) lists learning styles as auditory, visual, kinesthetic, field-dependent or field-independent. It is not a wise decision for a teacher to repeatedly use one way of techniques. So traditional group work formation is helpful but when a teacher uses it regularly, some students find it tedious and difficult to learn for those who prefer another formation.

Although results of this study show more than 90 % of teachers use the traditional group work formation, there are many other useful techniques to be implemented.

Here are some ideas:

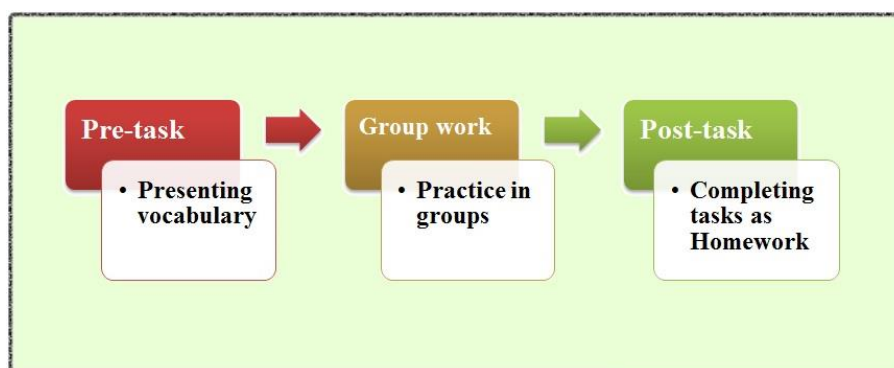
- Moving pair doing a task (kinesthetic learning style). For example, *running dictation* game will fit into this formation. A reader is running to the board to dictate his partner (a writer).
- A board game of 3 or 4 while the game requires doing some physical actions.
- Where is my group? This game requires each student to move around, ask questions and find his/ her group.
- Electronic tasks that may ask students to do tasks at home collectively.

Brown (2007) also suggested some techniques for group work, such as role play, drama, project, brainstorming, jigsaw activity and interviews.

Actually, building group work formation is a field of creativity and a teacher can be innovative in this by matching appropriately the task with a suitable formation. Many other formations can be applied successfully based on the time and purpose of the activity. This disparity can create a motivational factors for learners to be curious more when they are asked to work in groups.

In fact, formation of group work requires some considerations:

- It should be within the ability of the group or i+1
- Reading, writing and speaking are the skills which can accompany the most fruitful outcomes.
- Let learners choose their group members to be more convenient.
- Think carefully to choose an appropriate formation for a task. This can be like an assessment of a process.
- Framing the group work to fit the sequence of learning process (pre group work presentation and post-group work completion) as illustrated in figure 2.

**Figure 2 : group work as process****CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

The study aims at finding an optimal practice for group work activity. Results show that teachers prefer to the traditional group work formation. They give enough time for groups and extend the time to complete the tasks. They also prefer to form larger groups of 4 or 5 students. This can go well with the learning principles that assert the paramount significance of communication as means of maturation of behavior and cultivating the critical thinking with higher order skills in mental processing. This conforms to what Troike (2006) mentioned in which higher order skills can be more critical and valuable when multi mental communication occurs (p. 32). This study primarily serves teachers of ESL / EFL students whose background culture are prone to be extroverted. Teachers can successfully implement small group work based on his/her aims. However, larger group work can also work in case of large number of students in a classroom. Time allotted can be varied according the activity itself that can be assessed by a teacher. One fallible practice of many teachers in Saudi Arabia which is sticking to the traditional group work formation in which students face each other and do a task. However, there are many effective as well as efficient group work formations which should be utilized.

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