Employing Group Work to Foster Speaking Skills: A Study of Success and Failure in the Classroom[1]

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Abstract

This is a study of the group work conducted in two first-year engineering classes (Class A & Class B) to foster speaking skills in English. The teacher/researcher found that group work is a good way to develop speaking skills. The use of group work was accepted well by Class A but not by Class B. To prove this point, the teacher/researcher explains an activity that worked well in one class but not in the other. A Student Evaluation was collected at the end of the semester with the help of a questionnaire, based on the following factors: 1) the ideal number for group work; 2) the ideal type of grouping: fixed or flexible; 3) merits of group work; 4) problems faced; and 5) suggestions for improvement. The evaluation of the teacher/researcher was also carried out based on these factors for the purpose of self-study and improvement of the classes in the future. Analyzing the data from the Student Evaluation and the Teacher/researcher Evaluation, the study defines the elements that contribute to successful group work, and suggests a 5D procedure: direct, discuss, develop, deliver and document.

Resumen

El presente artículo describe un estudio de trabajo grupal, realizado en dos clases de ingeniería de primer año (Clase A y Clase B) para fomentar las habilidades orales en inglés. El investigador encontró que, aunque el trabajo en grupo es una buena manera de desarrollar habilidades de expresión, fue aceptado con entusiasmo por la Clase A pero no por la Clase B. Para demostrar este punto, el investigador explica una actividad que funcionó bien en una clase, pero no en la otra. Al final del semestre, se obtuvo retroalimentación de los estudiantes con la ayuda de un cuestionario, basado en los siguientes factores: (1) El número ideal para el trabajo en grupo; (2) El tipo ideal de agrupación: fijo o flexible; (3) Los méritos del trabajo en grupo; (4) Los problemas enfrentados; y (5) Las sugerencias para la mejora. La evaluación de la profesora-investigador también se llevó a cabo sobre la base de estos factores para el auto-estudio y la mejora de las clases en el futuro. Analizando los datos de la Evaluación de los Estudiantes y la Evaluación del Maestro, el investigador define los elementos que contribuyen al éxito del trabajo en grupo, y sugiere un procedimiento 5D para el mismo.

Introduction

The effectiveness of group work has been highlighted often in research papers, and now group work is accepted as a natural medium that fosters communication skills. The ability to work in a group and make individual and group presentations is required for the young prospective engineers who need to be trained in effective speaking skills and value-added interaction. This paper is a study of group work conducted in two classes of first-year engineering students (Class A and Class B) at an affiliated engineering college of a technical university in India. These students were in an English class where it is important to improve the English speaking skills. The students were admitted on the basis of merit. English as a second language is taught in the first two semesters incorporating the LSRW (listening, speaking, reading & writing) skills, but only reading and writing are tested at the examination. An approach of teaching speaking skills in the classroom is to include speaking activities in the first year so that the students' team skills and presentation skills will be enhanced. They hopefully will be able to take on group work for projects in the higher semesters and later at the workplace. Group work is a good way to help develop speaking skills. The teacher/researcher explains an activity done in Class A and Class B to

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show that group work was a success in one class and a failure in the other. The questions raised in this paper are:

1. Why does one class perform well in group work while the other does not?
2. What are suggestions to improve group work?
3. What are elements that contribute to an ideal group work?

A Student Evaluation was carried out with the aid of a questionnaire, and the following factors were evaluated: the ideal number for the group work, the ideal type of grouping (fixed or flexible), merits of group work, problems faced, and suggestions for improvement. The Teacher/researcher Evaluation was also considered to find out the elements that contribute to an ideal group activity.

Literature Review: Group Work

Group work is an important part of many different teaching approaches. Harmer (2007) reiterates the advantages of group work because it increases the number of speaking opportunities; provides a space for speakers to give their different opinions; encourages cooperation and negotiation skills; and promotes learner autonomy. In addition, Ur (2011) mentions that a good discussion is one in which most students speak as much as possible. If the participants are motivated, if their expressions are alive, if they react to the ideas of the speaker, and if they can use the language as they require, then it is a proof that the discussion is going well (Ur, 2011).

Motivation is a key factor in group work wherein students perform at a personal level because they feel less inhibited about committing errors, which is a stepping stone to learning (Long & Porter, 1985). According to Hess (2001), a group is a natural framework for sharing ideas in the real-world scenario, and it is ideal for a language classroom to communicate. In a large class, students can learn much from group work, because they practice oral fluency, and learn to speak with other members of the group (Hess, 2001). Also students lower their affective domain in small groups and feel more comfortable (Hess, 2001).

Depending on the quality of members in a group, group work can facilitate learning and can create a positive classroom atmosphere. On the other hand, some groups are able to create disharmony and dissatisfaction. Johnson and Johnson (1999) mention that the most influential theory that underlies cooperative learning is the social interdependence theory. This theory states that social interdependence exists when the achievement of a person's objectives is influenced by the action of others. The essential elements that make group work highly cooperative are that students should be positively interdependent and individually accountable. They should promote each other's success, use appropriate social skills, and periodically process how as a group they improve their effectiveness (Johnson & Johnson, 1999; Johnson & Johnson, 2015; Johnson, Johnson & Smith, 2014).

Martin Parrott (1993) comments on the problems teachers face when group work is carried out. Students often make a lot of noise. The seating arrangement is fixed and does not lend itself to group work. The students tend to use their first language. Some students mention that they would like to listen to the teacher's voice and not so much of the voices of their peers within the class. To overcome these difficulties, Hess (2001) suggests that students should be aware of certain rules for group work. For example, every member has the right to speak without dominating; to encourage the passive members to speak; and

to concentrate on arriving at a group consensus after the discussion is over. Harmer (2007) advises teachers to come to an agreement to a code of conduct jointly developed by the students and the teacher. Finelli, Bergom and Mesa (2011) propose a framework for the successful conduct of group work as follows: design good team assignments; construct teams carefully; teach team-work skills; and assess student teams so that they can be better equipped for employability.

Taking into consideration some of the theories of experts mentioned above in ELT and Cooperative Learning, I would like to define group work which promotes speaking. Successful group work is one in which the students are highly committed to the activity given. Their level of participation is high and they help each other to achieve the goal. Students try to use English as much as possible during the discussions, and they speak only in English at the final performance.

The Activity

This section introduces the sample activity: "An Interview with a Celebrity" conducted in Class A and Class B. It was organised in two periods of 50 minutes each. For this activity, the class of 63 to 64 students was divided into five groups of ten to twelve each, depending on the students attending the class. Each group decided on a celebrity and prepared a questionnaire focusing on the celebrity's life. Then the group selected one member from the group to take the role of the celebrity. The supposed 'celebrity' was expected to answer the questions prepared. The time allotment for the performance was as follows:

- Initially, the teacher took five minutes to explain the activity to the whole class and then five minutes to divide the students into groups.
- The groups utilized twenty minutes to discuss and develop the content of the delivery.
- Each group had five minutes each for the delivery or presentation.
- Finally, the teacher documented the feedback in ten minutes.

The first group enacted the interview with the 'celebrity' sitting face-to-face with the rest of the group members. Then the group members asked their questions to the 'celebrity' who answered them. Likewise, the other groups also performed the activity with their chosen celebrities.

What Actually Happened in the Two Classes during the Activity?

In Class A, the first group chose T. Rajendran, the Tamil comedian, as their celebrity. The dialogues were in a Tamil-accented English. The performance was successful. The other groups selected celebrities like: Sachin Tendulkar, the cricketer; Rajnikanth, the superstar of the Tamil film industry; Surya-and-Jyothika, the popular Tamil film couple; and a State minister connected with a scam. These performances were also successful, and it was evident that the class enjoyed the activity.

On the contrary, in Class B, by the time the groups had completed their discussion and development of the content, the morning period had come to an end, and the rest of the performance had to be postponed to the last period of the same day. The continuity of the presentation was broken. The students were not willing to work on the presentation after the break. So they requested to be excused from the presentation.

Student Evaluation of Group Work

At the end of the semester, the teacher conducted a feedback session with the two classes using a questionnaire. This was also done as a group activity in eight groups of six to seven each. The questionnaire asked the following questions:

1. What should the ideal number of students for group work be?
2. What grouping do you personally prefer? Fixed or Flexible?
3. What are the merits of group work?
4. What are the demerits of group work?
5. What are your suggestions for group work?

The students' answers to the questionnaire were analyzed and the following is an analysis of the answers:

(1) The Ideal Number for Group Work

According to the student evaluation of Class A, four groups out of the eight groups recommended that the number of members in a group should be six to seven while one group preferred between seven and ten members. Another group proposed five as a good number for a group while yet another suggested eight. One of the groups agreed the number of members in a group should depend on the kind of activity conducted. In Class B, six groups recommended only six members in a group, while one group preferred seven members. Still another group opted for the number ten for a group.

(2) The Type of Grouping: Fixed or Flexible?

The students were asked which type of grouping they prefer: fixed or flexible. Fixed refers to retaining the same groups for all the activities during the whole semester while flexible refers to changing the groups for every activity.

In Class A, five out of the eight groups recommended flexible grouping because it helps them to enjoy a team spirit with several teams. It facilitates working with peers of different levels of competence and enables them to get better ideas. It aids their overall development too. One group specified that if a student gets into a non-cooperative group, he/she will get stuck with the same members for the whole semester, and his/her performance would be affected adversely. Two groups preferred a fixed group; one group did not mention any reason while the other group stated that understanding among the members would be better in a fixed group.

In Class B, all the eight groups preferred flexible grouping with reasons like: to have interaction with all the members of the class; to be able to share the ideas of brilliant students of the class; and to be friendly with the whole class. One group pointed out that a fixed group for the whole semester leads to rivalry between the groups, which may be carried over to the other semesters.

(3) Merits of Group Work

Class A's arguments were that group work contributes to the interaction, understanding and cooperation among members. The other merits mentioned were that it helps them to ward off their individual nervousness and reduce their individual pressure by brainstorming sessions in the group. It increases their personal and group responsibility.

It lets them share their knowledge and at the same time maintain the diversity of ideas. It also enhances their latent talent and furthers team work.

Class B suggested that group work improves confidence in public speaking. It expands their vocabulary, and expertise in a subject. It helps them to get involved, socialize, and give and receive ideas. It provides them a chance to explore new avenues such as acting. It enhances language skills, team spirit, adaptability and friendship. It also makes inactive members participate with their thoughts.

(4) Problems Faced

Class A noted that there are ego issues, fights due to misunderstanding, refusal to cooperate with certain members, lack of interest in the topic given, and difficulties to arrive at a concurrence. Sometimes one member dominates and a few others refuse to participate, thus forming a team within a team. A few members do all the work, while the rest remain passive but when the work is successful, the idlers also get the praise.

Class B had similar difficulties such as ego problems, psychological problems, inactive students, misunderstandings and arguments. They also noted that when group work is mocked by other groups, the ill-feeling persists for a much longer time, and the problems are carried over to real-life interactions. One group pointed out that students with communication problems are either left out or they refuse to interact. Some members participate with their efforts but are not noticed while some inactive members are praised for efforts that are not theirs.

(5) Suggestions for Improvement

Class A suggested that group work can be more effective: when the members have a proper understanding among themselves; when they listen patiently to the opinion of others; when members compromise their individual opinion for the sake of the group; and when they participate actively towards reaching the goal. They put forward the idea that if they were allowed to choose their own group members, there would be better cooperation. The activity should give a chance for everyone in the group to speak, and it should be a cooperative effort where arguments should be replaced by discussion and critical analysis. The English-speaking members should consciously give more importance to the views of their rural team mates so that the best out of each member is brought out.

Class B recommended that the first step for better group work is to allow the students to choose their own team mates and their own leader. This would make it possible for them to understand others, settle disputes among themselves, provide ideas sincerely, distribute work and responsibility properly, give equal opportunity to all, share equally the blame or the credit, leave personal problems behind, and enjoy working together. When success is achieved, each one's contribution should be highlighted.

The Teacher/researcher Evaluation: Discussion

The Teacher/researcher's Evaluation of group work was based on the same factors as the Student Evaluation. This was done for the purpose of self-study and improvement of the future classes. The analysis and findings are as follows:

(1) The Ideal Number for Group Work

The actual number of students for group work during the whole semester varied from three to twelve depending on the activity. The ideal number for group work is between

three and five, if the task is a short-term one (Oakley et al., 2007). On the other hand, for long-term tasks larger groups are better (Finelli et al., 2011; Johnson et al, 2007). Ning (2011) suggests that four students are easy to manage for small teams. It allows a comfortable seating arrangement congenial to pair work within the team, individual participation, and accountability. The data derived from the Student Evaluation also indicated that they prefer smaller teams of six. The number preferred by the teacher/researcher in this study is also six to seven.

(2) The Type of Grouping: Fixed or Flexible?

Fixed Group

The teacher/researcher's observations were that in a fixed group the monitoring of the students can be done successfully; the rebellious members can be pacified; and the 'student-redeemers' (the students who sympathize with the inactive students and perform for the teacher's satisfaction) can be properly guided. Ning (2011) mentions that long-term learning teams with stable membership are likely to enhance the quality and quantity of learning.

Flexible Group

The teacher/researcher's opinion is that in a flexible group there can be tremendous growth for students as they learn to get along with a large number of students. However, dividing the students into different groups each time may be time-consuming and noisy.

When this teacher/researcher started group activities nine years back, the class of 60 plus was divided into ten groups of six to seven each. The groups remained fixed for the semester, and this practice was carried out for three years. Later, she divided the students into flexible groups as some research suggested its advantages. On second thoughts, she accepted the view that her initial decision of a fixed group is better.

(3) Merits of Group Work

The teacher/researcher noted that in group work, students moved from being nervous to confident speakers. They built up a healthy relationship and a sense of responsibility. They developed leadership skills and social skills and attempted teaching one another. They became free from their dependence on the teacher and began to think on their own. They also practised how to agree or disagree with the ideas expressed.

(4) Problems Faced

The major problem in group work is "group hate" which refers to the "dread and repulsion" that some people have when working in a group (Sorenson, 1981, qtd in Burke, 2011). Poddar (2010) refers to "free riding" and "social loafing" which refers to a group-setting in which a student decides to contribute little or nothing to the group work. In such cases, the teacher/researcher noted that the students could get out of control for various reasons. The class was made noisy by students who were reluctant to perform. Groups, unwilling to perform first, requested more prep time, thus making time management difficult. There was unrest when students were not audible. It was difficult to gain attention and quiet them down after the discussion time. Students also tended to lapse into their native language easily.

(5) Suggestions for Improvement

The teacher/researcher puts forth suggestions for successful group work and finally proposes a 5D procedure for group work:

i. Create Challenging and Meaningful Activities

Most problems of poor group work arise from improper assignments. Michaelsen, Knight and Fink (2004) observe that students are often non-cooperative during group work because the assignments are badly planned, not because the groups are bad.

ii. Carry out a Student Evaluation of the Group Work

A Student Evaluation of group work would help students value group work and tackle the problems faced effectively.

iii. Conduct an Internal Classroom-based Evaluation and a Final Oral Exam

To evaluate students' actual speaking ability, an internal assessment and an oral exam should be conducted by the end of the semester. On the other hand, if students are expected to face only a written exam, they would not care to participate in the speaking activities in the classroom.

iv. Limit Group Work in the Classroom

If too many group activities are conducted, students may get fed up with group work. Therefore, the number of group activities done in a semester should be reduced accordingly.

v. Follow the 5D Procedure for the Group Activity

For the successful conduct of a group activity to foster speaking skills, I would like to propose a 5D procedure: The teacher provides the students with the proper directions for the activity and gives them enough time for a discussion. The students develop the content of the presentation, and get ready for the delivery. In the end, the teacher documents the feedback. The 5Ds are as follows:

1. Direct: the teacher directs the students how to go about the group work.
2. Discuss: the students discuss among themselves.
3. Develop: the students develop the content for presentation.
4. Deliver: the students deliver the content in front of the class.
5. Document: the teacher documents the feedback.

Why Does One Class Perform Well in Group Work while the Other Does Not?

Hess (2001) comments on the challenges a teacher faces while handling large classes. The class may get out of control, or have management problems. Teachers are often overburdened by excess work in large classes and they do not have much time to provide individual attention to students. It is possible for teachers to be affected by any bad experiences they had with group work and form a negative attitude towards it (Chapman et al., 2010). However, Hess (2001) notes that if group work does not work well one day, there may be hope for a different performance another day.

In the present study, Class A was committed to group work in the classroom, and stood out from the rest of the classes. Four years later, it was reported that Class A showed excellent team skills and presentation skills and participated in every activity they were

involved. These students were also successful at the time of the interview for job recruitments. Regrettably, in Class B, group activity did not work well probably because the teacher and the students could not follow the 5D procedure, step-by-step. This class had to stop at Step 3, which is, after developing the content for the presentation; they had little time to deliver their presentations. The teacher was also concerned with the students' lack of enthusiasm to perform after the break. Needless to say, the teacher's interest is also required for success. When group work becomes unsuccessful, it is up to the teachers to examine what went wrong and where. No doubt, group work is more likely to be a success when all the steps of the 5D procedure are followed.

The Ground Rules for a Successful Group Work

The teacher/researcher came up with guidelines for a successful group work to foster English speaking skills in the following way:

- plan challenging and meaningful activities
- stipulate the specific basic rules
- select an ideal number
- decide on the type of grouping
- insist on speaking in English during the group work
- monitor an equal participation
- encourage the students to be committed to the group work
- carry out a student evaluation
- arrange a classroom-based internal assessment for speaking
- conduct an end-semester oral assessment, and
- above all, follow the 5D procedure suggested.

Conclusion

This research was carried out as an introspective study using a sample activity conducted in the English class for engineering students. Evaluations of both students and the teacher/researcher were carried out and analyzed. Focusing on the elements analyzed, I have come up with guidelines or recommendations for ideal group work and I suggest a 5D procedure. The teacher/researcher recommends creating challenging and meaningful activities, handling the attitude of the students with care, organizing a classroom-based internal evaluation for speaking, and including a final oral exam. The study concludes with the idea that the best way to foster speaking skills is through group work. Done with enough planning, counselling, and monitoring, group work can entertain and inspire students in any class, irrespective of age, subject of study, aptitude and attitude.

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