Shirak State University after M. Nalbandyan Foundation

Final research paper

Topic: IMPLEMENTING GROUP WORK FOR DEVELOPING SPEAKING SKILLS

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CONTENT

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. 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 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.

CHAPTER 1. IMPLEMENTING GROUP WORK FOR DEVELOPING SPEAKING SKILLS
1.1 LITERARY OVERVIEW

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.

1.2   RESEARCH METHOD

These lessons were divided into six meetings with six different materials to be discussed and performed, such as business introduction (social gathering in business meeting), getting directions, products and services, making presentation, on the phone, placing and ordering and job interview test. During the activity process, the lecturer observed, guided and also directed the students, motivated them to be more active and placed the most proficient students into each group to help the underperforming students. Teacher gave assessment through observation sheets. The assessment weight range from 88-100 (very good), 80-less than 88 (good), 75-less than 80 (fairly good) and 65-less than 75 (satisfactory). All materials were prepared and given to them before the class began to

help them understand the materials easier and also to help them adapt with their roles and prepare themselves. At the first and the second meetings, for the topic of business introduction and getting directions, students were placed as if they were at business gathering. They met with some important clients and they made acquaintances to many people. They were asked to make name cards and they used the cards as their identities. They would ask about their new colleagues' office location and try to identify the location. It was the first time for them to speak in group and have role play therefore I found that some students were not serious, a little bit passive, still shy and still difficult to play the role that they have chosen. It might be because they were still new with this simulation. They were still reading the text. They were also still confused and not expressive in playing their role. The proficient students still dominated but they also helped and motivated the underperforming students to speak and enjoy the activity. The lecturer tried to find the solution to problems above after interviewing them about their topics. They just need time and opportunity to be better. The third and the fourth meetings were about products and services, and making presentation. Students were asked to read the material about how to have good presentation and brought some brochures of products. They were asked to become a senior marketing and would give presentation in front of some businessmen. These topics were interesting for them, perhaps because they had learnt about marketing. Therefore, students became more active, even though there were two or three students still stayed passive. Students also started to be serious, enjoyed their roles as senior marketing and as the audience in the company's presentation. Here, I found that some students could develop themselves well and improve their performance. They also learnt by doing, how to be good listener and speaker, respect to others opinion and not dominating the discussion. The fifth and the sixth meetings were about on the phone, placing and ordering and job interview test. Students were asked to read the material about how to have good conversation on telephone and they were also asked to prepare some brochures of products of food and hotels services. They were asked to become waiters and waitresses in restaurants and also as hotel staff. They gave information about the food and the hotel information to their customers. These topics were interesting for them, perhaps because they also learnt about communication. Therefore students became more active and enjoyed the role playing in group. Students also started to be more serious, and tried to be professional by answering questions about their restaurants' and the hotels products and facilities. Some students could develop their self-confidence and improve their performance. They also learnt how to give good information to customer by practicing it. After they discussed and had some presentation

in groups, then students were asked to have interview test. The materials of the test came from all the materials given in class before. It was a way to find out whether students understand the material and could improve their skill in speaking or not. Table 1 shows that there is a good improvement of the students' proficiency, such as in speaking and writing, after grouping them. It shows also that students have a good progress after giving them tests for three times such as individual interview and for once, group presentation and writing test. Most of them showed significant progress in individual tests, from test one to test three, but it can be seen from the table 1 also that those who achieved good result in individual interview, did not show the same in group's presentation. Some of them around nine students only got 60 to 65 in presentation however others got 70 to 85. After seeing the difference result then the writer tried to find out the fact by interviewing the nine students who got 60 to 65 in presentation. Most of them answered that they have not enough bravery to talk in front of the group. They prefer to speak face to face in individual interview session. Figure 1 shows the visualization of the students' progress after the treatment. The alternative teaching method, group work, that the research offered, has shown a significant change. The group work is successful in this research because this method allows students to look at the discussion material, work and discuss in their own group. This method gave them confidence in their ability to use language and in their ability to understand English grammar by helping each other in group. The lecturer, in this approach, serves more as a guide than as a formal lecturer after giving explanation about the materials. The teacher watches and guides the students to the right direction. Thus, the students take a more active role in the learning process and more independent role as well. After doing this research, the writer believes that the group work is an effective method in teaching English Speaking because they could help each other to understand the material, support ideas and shared the experience. After that students were asked to fill the questionnaires form which consisted of six statements. The answer was only Yes or No, it depended on how was their opinion about the method. The statements were related to the importance of group work in learning English, Group Work method can improve students' knowledge in grammar, group work method can motivate students in learning grammar, group work method is the effective method in teaching grammar, group work method can make students active in learning– teaching process and Maximize Teacher Talking Time (TTT) and Minimize Students Talking Time (STT).

CHAPTER 2.

2.1 IMPLEMENTING GROUP WORK FOR DEVELOPING SPEAKING SKILL

How can group work improve the students speaking skills?

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. 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 vprospective engineers who need to be trained in effective speaking skills and value-added interaction. This paper is study group work conducted in two classes year students (Class A and Class B) at an affiliated engineering college 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 reading & writing) skills, but only reading and writing tested at examination. approach of teaching speaking skills in classroom is include speaking activities in the first year so that the students' team skills and presentation ill be enhanced. They hopefully ill able take group work for projects in higher semesters and later at 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 show that group work was a success in one class and a failure in the other. The questions raised in this paper are:

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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.

2.2 SUGGESTIONS

Group Work can be used for the application of brainstorming, a task which is often too difficult for individuals to do, but is easy to do successfully in groups. An example is a speaking group task where three or four students discuss together to find the ideas in a text where the results are superior to what anyone of the group could do alone. Cottrell (1999: 12) declares that work where groups of students are working in the same room and even on a common problem does not necessarily ensure a Group Work process. If the group is managed in a totally autocratic manner, there may be little opportunity for interaction relating to the work. If there is functioning within the group, the process may be evolving. Even if the problem can be decided by a single person, there are two main benefits in involving the students who will carry out the decision. First, the motivational aspect of participating in the decision will clearly enhance its implementation. Second,

there may well be factors which implementers understand better than the single person who can supposedly have decided alone. Connery (1988: 35) states that the best way to ensure comparable effort amongst all the group members is to design activities in which there is a clear division of labor and each student must contribute if the group is to reach its goal. Group Work Activities for Improving Speaking Skills (Abdullah) 395 The Advantages and Disadvantages of Group Work The Advantages of Group Work Harmer (2007: 166) has stated that there are some advantages of Group Work. 1) Like pair work, it dramatically increases the number of talking opportunities for individual students. 2) Unlike pair work, because there are more than two people in the group, personal relationship are usually less problematic; there is also a greater chance of different opinions and varied contributions than in pair work. 3) It encourages broader skills of co-operation and negotiation than pair work, and yet is more private than work in front of the whole class. 4) It promotes learner autonomy by allowing students to make their own decisions in the group without being told what to do by the teacher. 5) Although we do not wish any individuals in groups to be completely passive, nevertheless, some students can choose their level of participation more readily than in a whole-class or pair work situation. Furthermore Brown (2001: 177) has also declared that the advantages of Group Work are as follows: 1. Group work generates interactive language. 2. Group work offers an embracing affective climate. 3. Group work promotes learners' responsibility and autonomy. 4. Group work is a step toward individualized instructions. The Disadvantages of Group Work Harmer (2007: 166) has also explained some disadvantages of Group Work as follows: 1) It is likely to be noisy (though not necessarily as loud as pair work can be). Some teachers' feel that they may lose control, and the whole–class feeling which has been built up may dissipate when the class is split into smaller entities. 2) Not all students enjoy it since they would prefer to be the focus of the teacher's attention rather than working with their peers. Sometimes students find themselves in uncongenial groups and wish they could be somewhere else. 3) Individuals may fall into group roles that become fossilized, so that some are passive whereas others may dominate. 4) Groups can take longer to organize than pairs, beginning and ending group work activities, especially where people move around the class, can take time and be chaotic (but only very briefly).

Lesson plan

Lesson plan (with teaching material)

Target audience	8 class
Subject	Speaking
Objective aim	To foster students' speaking skills and in the primary EFL classroom by creating a 'real life' communicative setting
Topic	Lost in London: Asking and giving directions
Method	Communicative language teaching (CLT)
Durations/Meetings	45 minujtes/ 2 meetings
Objectives	Students will be able to:

1. Develop student's speaking skills
2. Encourage asking and giving directions in English
3. Develop student's speaking micro skills
4. Raise students communicative skills
5. Achieve skills integration
6. Enchance students collaboration

Materials	A central London map, You-tube videos, a lap-top, worksheets

CONCLUSION

This research has been done simply to find the data in order to decide if this method is effective or not in teaching speaking. The findings of the study led to the conclusions that the problem of teaching speaking could be solved by adopting and practicing the group work method. The teaching of speaking through group work played positive role in improving the academic achievement of the students studying English. This can be seen from the result of the tests which increased significantly. It happened because students are more actively involved in the learning process. Based on the result of the study, itwas found that there was an improvement in students' speaking achievement from test-1, test-2, and test-3. The interview sheets and the observation sheet also showed the improvement that the students were more interested and motivated in speaking English. It means that there was an improvement on students' speaking achievement through group works not only the score, but also motivating the students to dare to speak English. Overall, they also got additional knowledge such as how to be a good listener and speaker, how students could develop their selfconfidence and improve their performance. They learnt by doing. This fact is suitable with the wise words which are made by Chinese famous philosophy, Confucius (in Zaini, et. all, 2002:13), he stated that: "What I hear, I forget. What I see, I remember. What I do, I understand". The lecturer, in this approach, serves more as a guide than as a formal lecturer. The teacher watches and guides the students in the right direction. Thus, the students take a more active in group in the learning process and more independent role as well. After doing this research, the research believes that group work is one of effective method in teaching Speaking English. It will work best because it will force the students to think critically and use their knowledge of the language. Students became more independent to use this method because they take a part of every activity, they think, they act they feel it and they help each other.

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