

## AN INVESTIGATION ON GROUP WORK IN ENHANCING STUDENTS' IDEAS, COLLABORATION AND ENGAGEMENT IN SPEAKING IN AN EFL CLASS IN VIETNAM

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### ABSTRACT

In the current period of time, the tendency of working in groups is being encouraged in most fields of life, stemming from the concept that "Collective intelligence is always brighter than the intelligence of each individual". Collaborative work is considered to be a fundamental factor in the effectiveness of human resources. Team-working means getting people to work together well on a task and looking forward to a common goal. This way of working will help individuals to complement each other's shortcomings and improve themselves. The following article will study how crucial group work is in developing learners' ideas, improving their cooperation, and engaging in their in-class activities. The aim of the article is to provide both teachers and learners with better academic knowledge and understanding of the benefits that collaborative learning would offer in the real English classes in Vietnam; hence, inspiring learners to take more advantage of group work.

**Keywords:** group work, collaborative work, team-working, students' ideas, collaboration, engagement.

### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Language teaching and learning have become an inevitable trend in Vietnam since the country opened its door for cultural and economic integration. It has recently drawn the attention of a large number of teachers and learners. Adults look forward to language courses, specifically English courses for their career development. Parents seek for high qualified English classes for their kids with the hope that their kids would become more active and confident in their life. The parents, furthermore, expect to equip their kids with sufficient language skills so that they can adapt to the social requirement when they get older. In order to meet the large demand of the society, besides the studying programs at state schools or universities, many language centers have been taken into operation. The English center where I have been working for almost eleven years now is also a notable example of this trend. There are a lot of targets intended for each course; however, not all learners are capable of achieving their studying goals. From the current issues, it is needed that there should be an innovation to improve the situation.

### 2.0 ISSUES & PEDAGOGICAL GOALS

It has commonly occurred in our speaking classes that students have to learn English speaking skills in a class with 25 – 30 students therefore teachers find it difficult to cover every student and increase the EFL environment for them. Besides, the learners are in

shortage of ideas when they talk and communicate with their friends in English. In addition, lacking vocabulary and confidence is also a big barrier that minimizes their language outcome. The other remarkable feature that can be easily recognized is our students have not got sufficient collaborative skills and engagement during the practicing time.

Taking all of these above factors into consideration, it is essential that teachers need to create the obvious pedagogical goals for our speaking courses. First of all, teachers' ability to manage a large-size class is mandatorily required. There should be more opportunities made for the learners in which they can explore the new ideas, exchange and discuss vocabulary. More importantly, teachers are the ones who should look for effective ways to promote learners' confidence and engagement in the class.

In order to deal with these mentioned classroom issues, it is the case that there should be something changed; however, planned and deliberated, is called "innovation" to improve the situation. From my workplace situation, I am into using "group work" to enhance students' ideas, collaboration, and engagement in the speaking class.

### **3.0 RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

1. How does group work enhance EFL learners' speaking?
2. How do learners engage in and respond to group work?

### **4.0 INNOVATION AND TYPES OF INNOVATION**

In recent decades, there have been numerous innovations done by teachers and researchers about "task-based learning", "learner-centered approach", "communicative methods, and "ICT in teaching and learning". These innovations, in spite of success or failure, have suggested considerably useful information for both educators and learners. "What is innovation?" - Innovation is primarily defined as "an idea, object or practice perceived as new by an individual or individuals, which is intended to bring out improvement in relation to desired objectives, which is fundamental in nature and which is planned and deliberate" (Nicholls, 1983:4, cited in White, 1988, 114). Rogers (2003:12), on the same point of view, discussed that innovation is "an idea, practice or object perceived as new by an individual or another unit of adaptation". Kennedy (1996:4) added innovation is a process which "implies some deliberation and consciousness". Innovation is, generally, known as intended change based on current problems for better development. It is the introduction of something new in a new context. There are two main kinds of innovation: pedagogical innovation and curricular innovation. While curricular innovation principally focuses on teaching materials, pedagogical innovation emphasizes learning approach and teaching methods which can lead learners to study themselves to get positive results.

With this belief in mind, I come up with the idea of using group work in language teaching and learning. Using group work in teaching belongs to pedagogical innovation. Group work is a form of cooperative learning which requires cooperation and support from group members in order to achieve the expected results. Group work can help to develop communication skills, collaborative skills, and critical skills for the learners. The ultimate purpose of using group work in the class is to increase learners' speaking output and engage the learners in the learning process. Group work has been proved to greatly contribute to

learners' outcomes. According to Ur (2012), when students are grouped to work together, they can have opportunities to discuss and share their ideas with peers. Working in a group can motivate learners, encouraging them to cooperate with others. Group work, on the other hand, fosters learner autonomy and enhances learners' oral fluency.

#### **4.1 Types of Innovation**

Using group work to enhance students' ideas, collaboration, and engagement in English-speaking classes is called pedagogical innovation and is considered a selected contact change. According to Markee, N. (1997), selected contact change occurs when innovation is from outsiders but chosen by insiders. Group work is not a new idea in EFL teaching and learning. The idea of group work has been popularly used in many language classes. Group work, despite its benefits, has not become an effective teaching aid in our language center therefore; I myself, a teacher as well as a researcher, desire to bring it back to our class with the hope that group work can help to solve our current issues. This innovation is raised from our language class issues and intended to be implemented in an English-speaking class at our language center in Vung Tau city, Vietnam so it is just a small-scale innovation. In addition, the idea of using group work is from the class teacher, thus, it is regarded as bottom-up and needs to be done incrementally.

#### **5.0 LEARNING THEORIES**

The thought of exploiting the benefits of group work in the class was founded based on social constructivism theory. Vygotsky (1978) viewed cognitive development primarily as a function of cultural, historical, and social interaction rather than of individual construction. Additionally, Hoover (1996) noted that students can learn better by being active. Social interaction is also another significant factor that contributes to the positive outcome for the learners (Mathon, 1997). Ernest (1999) underlined the value of collaborative learning. Be provided with strong support from the above well-known scholars, group work is an ideal teaching tool which is greatly suggested to apply in our English-speaking class. Group work can bring students together. They can have a chance to work together and interact with each other.

#### **6.0 LITERATURE REVIEW ON INNOVATION AND INNOVATIVE TEACHING PRACTICE**

##### **6.1 Literature Review**

Various studies have been done on the role of group work in teaching and learning and plentiful results have been collected. In Truong & Neomy (2007) viewpoint, students generate the most ideas during the time they are grouped to study together. This finding encourages me to use group work activities in the class because our students usually complain that they do not have ideas to talk to their friends. McCafferty, Jacobs & Iddings (2006), Adams & Hamm (2007), and Shimazoe & Aldrich (2010) referred to the other affirmative aspect of group work which is cooperative learning. On the word of these authors, group members can learn from each other's strengths and weaknesses to develop an achievable goal and exhibit their skills. Cooperative learning promotes students to learn by doing and working together in groups to accomplish a common goal. In our speaking class,

the learners are quite different. Some are very active, some are a little bit passive, some are quick and some are slow. Some are good at pronunciation, some are good at grammar, and some are good at intonation. Generally, each of them has his or her own good and bad points. By working in groups, students can benefit from their classmates' strengths and eliminate the weaknesses that they experience. As stated by Jacobs & McCafferty (2006), learners' language fluency is promoted through group projects. Learners are given opportunities to get feedback from others in order to develop their speaking skills whereas cooperative learning activities enhance motivation for learners. The teaching and learning environment is seen as a crucial feature that leads to the success or failure of the class. If the teacher can engage the students in the lesson and motivate them, their language outcome will be far expected. Due to these proven results, I believe that using group work to enhance students' ideas, collaboration, and engagement in the speaking class is a good choice.

## **6.2 Innovative Teaching Practice**

The reason that I decide to do the innovation is to help the learners in my center generate more new ideas for the topics. I desire to help them to promote cooperation among their friends and engage them in their learning process.

During the teaching practice, students will be divided into groups. In the class, the teacher will deliver clear tasks for them on what to do and how to do the task. First of all, the teacher will give them some questions about the specific topic so that they can discuss it together. Next, the teacher can give them some pictures about the topic so that they can guess and catch more new ideas. The students can have different opinions on the same picture therefore group work serves the purpose of generating ideas for learners. Then, the teacher will provide them with some reading materials. The reading materials will be cut into small parts. Each group will be in charge of reading and talking about one part. After that, they will present their part to share the ideas with other groups. After the discussion, they can take note of the main points and use mind maps to organize the ideas for the whole topic. When the students are at home, they will be asked to join a created forum on Facebook. Each student will be assigned one section of the topic to present and be asked to make a Livestream video; the other students will go online, watch and listen to their friends, giving comments and suggestions about their friends' performances. The teacher will observe the whole procedure and give an additional evaluation for the learners so that they can improve their speaking better. The aim of using Facebook is that Facebook is now one of the most popular social networks. It is widely used by our learners due to its convenience. Facebook can help students to communicate with each other quickly and easily. Facebook, moreover, engages the students in the learning process more and more.

From the above activity for the class, it can be foreseen that a group project is an effective teaching tool that can help the learners to generate more new ideas, promote collaborative learning, increase interaction and get more engagement the learners in the lesson.

## **7.0 RESEARCH SETTING AND CULTURAL ASPECTS**

This research will be conducted at a language center called NES (the Natural English School) in Vungtau city, located in the south of Vietnam. My center has been in operation for almost 12 years now. It is one of the most well-known English centers in the city for its unique

teaching method and good teaching quality. Our main products are communicative English for adults and English for kids. Besides we are also opening Ielts or Toeic, A2, B1, B2 (CEFR) training courses for the learners. This research will be done in an English-speaking class with a total number of 20 students of which there are 8 female students and 12 male students. It is a mixed-aged class. The age of the learners will be ranging from 20 to 40 years old. They are all from different professions and different regions. The most outstanding feature of the habitants where I live is that not many people were born in the city but they came from diverse regions in the country so their characteristics and religious cultures are somehow dissimilar. They have high requirements and expectations for the teacher and for the course. Moreover, some of our learners usually feel shy when they have to talk in front of people and they are afraid of making mistakes. Our learners; however, have a passion and clear aim for learning English in common. They all participate in the English-speaking course to serve the purpose of career development. Vungtau city is famous for the oil and gas industry so besides one of the biggest oil and gas state companies – Vietsopetro, there are still a lot of foreign businesses run in our city. Most of these businesses require English in their workplace therefore the employees need to equip themselves with good language skills to meet the demand of the organization in particular and of the society in general. The course will last 30 hours approximately 4 weeks. Students are at the intermediate level and they are expected to study 5 days a week for 1.5 hours a day. The classroom is equipped with essential facilities such as an air conditioner, a computer, a projector, a smart board, and high qualified sound system. The class teacher is required to take part in the center training course before teaching. There is a receptionist who is responsible for checking students' attendance, calling students when they have not yet been at the school, and arranging the tutoring schedule for the weak students. After each class, the teacher will have a talk with the receptionist about the students who need tutoring and suggest the area that they have to improve.

## **8.0 METHODOLOGY**

The qualitative method is the best choice for this innovation. Hatch (2002) said the qualitative study "provides data obtained in natural settings where participants act in their own without forces". Flick (2009) added that the qualitative method "seeks to interpret meaning, behaviors by analyzing concrete cases and starts from participants' activities in their local contexts". As discussed, doing group work in teaching and learning is not a new idea; however, in the new context, the different objects will have dissimilar influences.

The study exploits the action research method as the researcher is also a teacher of the class. The teacher looks for innovation to solve the classroom issues and enhance learners' language speaking skills. As said by Costello (2003), action research is considered a small-scale investigation. It deals with "solving the practical problems". It is practical and accessible. It helps to address the immediate issues.

## **9.0 INSTRUMENTS, DATA COLLECTION AND DATA ANALYSIS**

### **9.1 Classroom observation**

DeMunck (1998) noted that observation is "to get rich detail description of participants' behaviors, intentions, situation, and events". Twenty learners will be divided into 4 groups. They are required to work together under the supervision and instruction of the teacher. The

teacher will observe the way they behave with their classmates, the way they interact with the tasks, how they work with their friends and whether they are engaged in the group work activities or not. It is believed that the learners will react honestly when they are with their friends and they feel more comfortable and less shy when they study with their friends because they are in the same level. The observation will be in 4 weeks of the course. During the studying time, the teacher will take notes and record the conversation among learners. After that, the notes taken by the teacher will be interpreted and coded.

### **9.2 Focus group interview**

The purpose of the interview is to explore learners' thinking about group work activities and ask about the benefits learners can get when they study together. The reason for focus group interviews but not the individual interview is due to time-consuming. There are 20 students in the class. If the interview is conducted individually, it will take a lot of time. Furthermore, our learners, as stated above, usually feel shy when they are asked to talk in front of people. They sometimes do not dare to tell the teacher the truth because they are afraid of being laughed at and they may be afraid that the teacher may not be happy with their answer. Once they are assigned to answer the questions in the group they have no need to worry much about their concerns. As a result, they can provide the teacher as the researcher with the most reliable results. Dahlberg & McCaig (2010) said "It is from the interaction of the group that the data emerge". The group focus interview will be conducted in 15 minutes for each group after the completion of the course. The answer will be recorded and transcribed. All the information will be taken notes and interpreted.

### **9.3 Student journal entry**

According to Wiki online dictionary, a journal is a diary in which you write about what happens to you and what you are thinking. We decide to take student journal entries because we expect to get various feedback from our learners. Each student will be given a piece of paper at the end of the course. They will freely write down their reflection on the course without leaving their names. The teacher, after collecting all the journal entries, will read, interpret and code them to look for the answer.

The research is conducted by three different types of instruments: classroom observation, focus group interview, and student journal entry, therefore it guarantees the crucial requirements such as triangulation (Oslen, 2004), validity, and reliability (Griffiee, 2012) for research.

## **10.0 ETHICAL CONCERNS**

Two main areas of ethical concerns need to be addressed: protection of participants and research integrity.

Regarding the protection of participants, it is essential that researchers have to care about these ethical issues: permission, explanatory statement, consent form, confidentiality, and power relation. As I am working in a language center, I must ask for permission from my boss before doing research in my English-speaking class. Once I am allowed to work on my study, I need to send my participants a clear explanatory statement about my project to make sure

that they all properly understand what they are going to do. After that, they will be required to fill in the consent form if they totally agree to join in the research. While doing the research, their names will be kept confidential. The power relation in this case is no longer a matter when the participants get to know clearly the purpose of the study and the benefits they can be offered if they join the project. As mentioned in the section on cultural aspects, our learners are all adults. They are mature and they have apparent targets for their learning. They study in this speaking class to improve their speaking skill. They are willing to talk and share their opinion about the course with the teacher. They pay for the course and they expect to receive what they deserve. They do not so much care for the scores but the real language-speaking production.

The study is also under the control of research integrity. The idea of using group work to enhance learners' ideas, collaboration, and engagement in the English-speaking class in Vung tau city, Vietnam is applicable. Next, the research applies various methods to collect the information therefore it is valid and reliable. Furthermore, the study provides the participants with numerous benefits that contribute to their better language-speaking outcomes.

### **11.0 POTENTIAL PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS**

During the time the research is taken, there are still potential problems hinted at. The participants may be unwilling or shy to participate. The researcher needs to motivate them by showing them the benefits that they can get from group work activities. The teacher may use the real story of a case of shyness to encourage the participants. There should be one good student assigned as a group leader to conduct the group and guide everyone on what to do. In addition, the group may consist of extroverted students who dominate the weaker ones or the students may have conflicts of interests. In order to handle these matters, teachers should put them in appropriate groups according to ages, interests, and genders. There should be clear tasks given to individuals to make sure that all group members must work together. What is more, taking advantage of the Facebook Livestream application for further English speaking practice is something new to the participants because a large number of our learners are used to using Facebook Livestream for entertainment, not for studying; hence, they may encounter habit change problems. What the teacher should do is explaining the participants the positive aspects of Facebook Livestream on studying. Teachers can make a real example inside the class so that the learners can experience how interesting it is to apply Facebook live streaming.

### **12.0 CONCLUSION**

Apart from obvious findings of the benefits of group work in language speaking skills, it is, in my own context, predicted that group work can enhance our learners' ideas, collaboration, and engagement in the class. The research is believed to be innovative and successful. It is just a small-scale innovation, taking place in a specific English-speaking class with fully described features about the learners. It meets the requirement of legal support, sustainability, course target, cultural suitability, and ethical considerations.

(3543 words)

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