UNDERSTANDING COLLABORATIVE LANGUAGE LEARNING THROUGH GROUP WORK

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Abstract:

Group work as an element of modern pedagogy has its foundation in the Constructivist Approach. We are social beings and group work, if executed suitably, for instance, in consonance with Vygotsky's concept of 'Social Scaffolding' can be a very effective methodology for joyful and natural learning in English Language Teaching (ELT) classes. Group work enables learners to develop, elaborate, question and support each other's ideas through communication. As we are aware, communication using language is a fundamental means of learning the language. Moreover, group work ensue Collaborative Learning which is yet another vital tenet in classrooms as well as society at large. Proficiency in the English language is an asset when the learner becomes a productive member of the society via his/her profession. Nevertheless, group work is not a fool proof methodology for ELT classes; it has its own challenges. This paper sheds light on the intricate nature of group work and its reliance on effective execution.

Key words:

Group work, English language, methodology, communication, collaborative learning, scaffolding

Introduction: Before Commencing Group Work

Group work in English Language classes is a viable and feasible means of teaching-learning of English. In order to learn English, learners must be provided with ample opportunities of its use in a non-intimidating milieu. This sharing with each other through the use of the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing will led to further development of their command and proficiency of English.

This, inevitably, thrusts a substantial amount of managerial challenges on the teacher. Group work can also be beset by issues in many nuanced forms such as subtle intellectual bullying; or the encouragement of mediocrity or merely by disorderly behaviour. Henceforth, the English teacher must be acquainted with certain fundamental principles of group work before commencing with it in her class. These principles are stated below:

* The teacher must have perceptibly demarcated tasks principally with regard to its objectives and timeframe. The learners need to be made cognizant of the same.
* The teacher must provide clarity in the role and contribution of each member in the given group work. Mature learners can be spurred to allocate the group work required in the task aptly among each other.
* The teacher must set and implement stringent rules to curtail unnecessary talk and wastage of time. A learner in each group can take up this responsibility to assist the teacher.
* The teacher must offer her support and arbitrate if required in the advancement of the group work; nonetheless, she should kindle interdependent learning.
* The teacher must be amply equipped to handle any disorderly conduct of the learners.

Four "S" Activities

Group works in ELT classrooms must be perceived as "application" activities. These are integral to Team-Based Learning (TBL), a standard practice of *collaborative learning* in education. TBL associates and augments learners' social and cognitive experience of the classroom unlike any other mode of group work. Michael Sweet has provided the following four principles based on which these activities are to be implemented in such classrooms:

1. Significant Problem

Learners should work on a problem or 'topic' as a group which should enable them to understand its implications. The teacher should provide a 'framework' in order to enhance learning. For instance, the teacher can provide the structural components of a "play or drama" prior to dividing to learners into groups for roleplaying in an English play from literature.

2. Specific Choice

When dealing with a topic in English language, learners in their groups should be required to make certain 'decisions', for instance, 'the character sketch of various roles in roleplaying'. Groups can be told to come up with written rationales to justify their decisions.

3. Same Problem

All the learners should work on the same problem or topic so that they will communicate and understand intergroup similarities and differences in viewpoints. As stated in the above example, each group must make own character sketches for a given play in English.

4. Simultaneous Reporting

Whenever feasible, learners should report their decisions within the same class period so that differences in group decisions can be explored. This will spur intra-group as well as inter-group discussions. The teacher's task is then to expedite conversation among the groups. Thus 'sharing' of their opinions and ideas would occur in a natural way using English language for the conversation or even written communication.

Classroom Organisation for Group Work

Group work is indispensable for a communicative classroom. In contemporary classes, it is indubitably the fundamental means through which teachers can provide leaners the opportunities to practise what they had learnt earlier or to simply communicate to understand new topics. The classroom needs to be organised in suitable ways for executing group work.

⁜ Open Groups

Teacher-Group

Teacher-Group is a form where the teacher monitors groups at work and can talk to a particular group about the way they are working or question about the group work they have been set. The group might also request the teacher to elucidate something they are unable to comprehend about the work, or to report to the teacher their outcomes when they have completed their work.

Group-Group

Group-Group is a form that is adopted as constituent of the feedback from a group work. Here the teacher asks two groups to share their outcomes with each other. Alternatively, all the groups in the class can be provided an open forum regarding their outcomes. In such situations, the teacher plays the role of a facilitator rather than as a participant.

⁜ Closed Groups

Closed group work is deliberated a customary part of communicative ELT methodology. It encompasses 'information gap' and 'opinion gap' tasks and often implicates cooperative discussions and problem-solving, sometimes comprising role-playing, for instance as a board making a decision. Several benefits ensue for both learners and teachers. The shortcoming is the specific problem of 'social loafing' (Woodward, 1995: 8-9) where one of the group decide that they are not going to bother, leaving the others to do all the work.

The teacher can also employ a combination of pair and group formats.

⁜ Groups into Pairs

This is conducted in two stages. It can be used to discuss an issue and/or the language required to tackle the issue in groups before they move on to do the task in pairs. For instance, role-play of brother and sister

fighting over a television programme. In the first stage, the 'brothers' assemble in groups of four to discuss about what they might say in this particular situation and the 'sisters' do the same. In the second stage, the learners are paired as brother and sister for the role-play. Consequently, the learners feel more confident and now have a repertoire of likely conversational content to say. This is a particularly beneficial methodology in larger classes with a wide range of ability.

Pairs into groups

This is also a two stage propagative methodology of working, predominantly in discussions. In its protracted arrangement it is called 'pyramiding'. In the first stage, the learners are paired to discuss a problem and its solutions. The pairs are now paired into groups of four to arrive at a group solution. The fours are then paired into groups of eight to execute the same work.

Strategies for Group work in ELT Classes

English classes like any other language class provide a plethora of opportunities for collaborative learning through group work. The following are some strategies that can be employed by the English teacher:

- ❖ **Debating**
- ❖ **Group Presentations**
- ❖ **Socratic Talk**
- ❖ **Talking Triads**
- ❖ **'Think-pair-share and 'Think-pair-square'**
- ❖ **Snowballing**
- ❖ **Jigsaw method**
- ❖ **Project Based Learning**
- ❖ **Problem Based Learning**
- ❖ **Devise the Display**
- ❖ **Gallery Critique**
- ❖ **Mastery Modelling**
- ❖ **Debating**

The Oxford Rules Model is an important model for any ELT classroom. It offers a lucid structure and even a level of decorum which is significant; deliver rationality and greater intelligibility to the debate. The basic rules are as follows:

- ▪ Four speakers are chosen for each team (for and against the issue)
- ▪ First speaker presents all the ideas that team has engendered
- ▪ Second speaker summaries two or three supplementary ideas in some depth
- ▪ Third speaker summaries two or three ideas in some depth
- ▪ Fourth speaker critiques the ideas presented by the opponent team
- ▪ Each individual speaker has a specific time period (e.g. two minutes) to speak, with buffer time of thirty seconds at the commencement or the culmination
- ▪ The remaining of the class is the 'Floor' and can interject at any time via a 'Point of Information'. The speaker may assent or decline an interjection.

The teacher may also make other groups work as 'feedback observers' for the ongoing debate. This is advantageous as it engages the whole class and makes them participate through active listening.

- ❖ **Group Presentations**

The strategy of 'Group Presentations' encompasses creating and modelling a culture of enquiry by asking learners questions about a given topic, instead of didactically proving them the answer. The teacher commences with a 'big question'; then it is taken on by groups who are provided materials, such as books, magazines, essays, or access to the library or an ICT set. They have to cross-examine the question, creating

their personal sub-set of questions about the question or topic. They then engage in research work, before concluding to agree to the answers to the questions they had created themselves earlier. Roles such as leader, secretary, designer, scribe and so on can be allocated.

❖ **Socratic Talk**

The strategy of 'Socratic Talk' is also based upon the rules of 'Debating', hence, there is a well-delineated structure. This is achieved with the formation of 'Socratic Circles' that engender debate and feedback in a continuous manner. It may be noted that teacher need to be skilled to teach learners to constructively talk in this way, however, once they get a hold of it, this skill can serve as a vital tool in their repertoire. It has been observed that the most profound insights have burgeoned from this strategy. Moreover, the listening skills fortified are paramount and impart an ongoing progressive impact. This correspondingly ensures that each learner is entrusted with a role and quality feedback becomes a positive outcome.

❖ **Talking Triads**

The strategy of 'Talking Triads' consists of a triad of 'a speaker, a questioner and recorder or analyst'. This strategy offers the learners an opportunity to meticulously analyse ideas and views from a chosen topic. The teacher can prepare questions, or preferably encourage the questioner and the analyst to prepare questions whilst the speaker reflects upon potential answers. This can be done in front of the class or all triads can work concurrently. Worthwhile listening opportunities can be created while they work concurrently. For this the teacher may raise her hand while standing next to a certain triad to signal the other groups to pause and listen whilst that particular triad carries on.

❖ **'Think-pair-share and 'Think-pair-square'**

Learners are first divided into pairs and asked to talk to each with each other and share their ideas about a topic relevant to the English class. Then two pairs are linked together and further communication and sharing takes place with the use of English. This is a very simple strategy and can be used on a regular basis to spurs *scaffolded* learning as learners give voice to their notions and receive prompt feedback from their classmates. It also stimulates debate and collaborative learning among the groups.

❖ **Snowballing**

Learners are first divided into small groups and then the groups are expanded in a structured way. For instance, they can be asked a question as a whole class; followed by pairing them; then expanding to groups of four and so on. This methodology is effective for building upon ideas, shaping viewpoints and resolving a challenge in a constructive manner.

❖ **Jigsaw method**

The 'jigsaw method' is similar to 'Snowballing' however; it is slightly more intricate and needs careful planning. The same number of groups are formed as the number of learners known as the 'Home Group'. One learner from each group is the 'Expert' for the same topic that is provided to them. Each 'expert' from each group gathers together and furthers their 'expertise' of the same topic that has been assigned to them. Then each 'expert' returns to their 'home' group and share their findings. It is an adept methodology of varying group dynamics in addition to scaffolded learning.

❖ **Project Based Learning**

The factors of Project Based Learning include ascertaining actual audiences and objectives for learner work which also functions as a motivating factor; encouraging inter-reliant learner work, often subtly guided by the teacher whenever required; allowing learners assume roles and handle the ensuing challenges that arise; an integrated form of learning occurs; and the questions and knowledge are constructed by learners construct themselves.

❖ **Problem Based Learning**

Problem Based Learning is related to the above strategy of group work; however, it explicitly deals with a problem to be resolved. It is suggested that the teacher, or learners in collaboration, find a particular local or class based problem in English language and approach it systematically in a scientific manner. However, this strategy is criticised as it burdens the learners with the 'cognitive load'. This required explicit lucid instructions by the teacher and teacher led examples to ensure that learners have effective models to work with.

❖ **Devise the Display**

The traditional form of 'display' of learner's work needs to be replaced with what is called a 'working wall', that can be regularly changed or updated ;or function as a 'learning continuum' for an entire topic when can be periodically added to each lesson (Quigley, 2013). Such an arrangement can offer a tangible highly worthwhile learning potential in the process of learners devising as well as creating wall displays. It is a remarkable formative feedback to devise a wall display once the learners are mid-way through a topic. It makes the learners identify and prioritise the key elements of their knowledge in addition to the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing they are honing.

❖ **Gallery Critique**

The strategy of employing a 'Gallery Critique' in classrooms was put forward by Berger. It encompasses certain explicit protocols learners should follow. The whole of the group work must be displayed in a gallery style for an adequate period of time. Learners are instructed to initially undertake a short silent viewing and making notes to reflect later. The learners make notes and remarks on the work. This is followed by a group discussion of 'what they noticed' specifically, along with constructive debate and discussion. Then there is a discussion and conversation regarding 'what they liked', while evaluating the work. During the last stage, the teacher synthesises various viewpoints and ensures that learners make notes. They are encouraged to reflect upon useful observations to assist in making improvements in their work.

❖ **Mastery Modelling**

The strategy of 'Mastery modelling' comprises a system of formative assessment from learners, wherein the teacher provides a group a series of models including both ideal models and certain imperfect models such as with common errors that learners can prospectively detect. The learners in a group are required to perform a critical appraisal of these models and ascertain their summary assessment of the models at the outset, prior to devising and presenting a 'mastery model' that is a composite prototype model of work. This strategy works well for writing an essay. The presentation of the group work must consist of an explicit focus upon the steps taken that lead to the design and conception of the 'mastery model' in the course of the feedback.

Benefits and Challenges of Group Work

Some may comment that the methodology of Group work is easier said than done! There is an element of truism in this statement; however, a skilled teacher would find ways of overcoming any ensuing challenges as the benefits of Group work are indubitable.

➢ **Talk**

Group work provides the learners plenty of opportunities to speak in English in the classroom. It also enables the learners to actively participate in the class as they are engaged in talking to their friends or classmates exchanging viewpoints, practising newly learnt words rather than silently listening to the teacher speaking. This is important in our Indian schools where English classes are held on a daily basis during a week. However, more often than not in a substantial number of Indian schools teachers focus on too much tangible written work or mechanical 'reading' practise. Speaking or talk as a language skill is commonly overlooked in favour of a 'silent' classroom. Nonetheless, English teachers can devote just ten to fifteen

minutes of each period for the learners to engage in 'productive and meaningful talk'. This can be achieved by dividing the class into groups and to give the learners prospect to actually use the language to converse with one another.

➢ **Time**

In the beginning, organising and implementing group work may be time consuming and entails extra effort from the learner. Nevertheless, by employing this methodology on regular basis learners become more proficient and skilled at using the language even outside the classroom. The teacher may have to prepare diverse activities taking into consideration learners' capabilities and potentials. It is beneficial to employ group work with mixed ability classes wherein both able and less able learners may feel a sense of accomplishment on completion of an activity. She must decide about the level of the learners and prepare appropriate activities so as to impart a higher level of contentment and inspiration for the learners. The greatest benefit is that in the long run group work actually cultivates learners' independence.

➢ **Skills other than language proficiency**

Group work also contributes towards integration of the class. Learners learn how to collaborate with one another, make conciliations, negotiate as well as respect other learners with diverse capabilities and opinions which is significant for the class environment and relationship with each other and the teacher. The learners can help each other through peer-learning Instead of struggling alone trying to figure out something challenging.

Conclusion

Group work is in reality an age-old methodology that has been a significant element in daily lives of people. In our society people get a substantial amount of their work done through group work. The premise of 'Man is a social animal' holds true here. Hence, a kind of natural learning occurs via effective implementation of group work through various strategies. Teaching-learning of English by employing group work in Indian classrooms is a sure means of developing English language proficiency in our learners.

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