

The Effectiveness of Group Work and Pair Work for Students of English at Undergraduate Level in Public and Private Sector Colleges

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Abstract

The study investigated one of the teaching strategies of collaborative language teaching (CLT), namely group work and pair work. The introduction of a new English textbook at the undergraduate level has created some difficulties for teachers. These difficulties include the use of group and pair work. This innovation demands a move in the direction of a more learner - centered approach to teaching. The scope of the study was limited to the teachers and students perception, attitude and beliefs about collaborative teaching. The focus was on one of the strategies of CLT – group work and pair work. Concrete recommendations were given to improve the status of group work and pair work at the undergraduate level in public and private sector institutions of Pakistan.

Keywords: *Effectiveness, group work and pair work*

Introduction

This study provided an opportunity to explore the possibility of the use of one of the techniques of collaborative language teaching (CLT), that is, pair work and group work. Group and pair work are techniques for collaborative teaching that provide a chance for social interaction. Group work and pair work is a class management strategy and the role the teacher has to play while teaching is of a facilitator. Teacher's role in group work is very difficult and at the same time it is very important role too. Groups that are focused are a temporary clustering of students within a single class session. These groups can be pairs of students or groups of three or four can be formed to solve a problem or pose a question. The teacher can organize these groups at any time in a class of any size to check on the students' understanding of the material, to give students an opportunity to apply what they are learning, or to provide a change of pace.

In a traditional classroom, the teacher controls the class with authority, there is no active role of students during teaching- learning process. Contrary to this group work makes students autonomous learners who work collaboratively for their own learning. Language classroom is the place where teachers and learners come together for interaction and can learn in natural settings. Group work is a teaching strategy at all levels of education and researchers observed that group based assignments and discussions are a common feature of tertiary education (All Wright & Bailey, 2004). The effective use of group work in language class can provide a

valuable learning experience to students and give them the opportunity to practically experience the ideas presented and strengthen their learning.

The purpose of this research was to find out the role of student participation in generating interest in class and obtaining valid information regarding the practical use of group work from different aspects, so as to bring innovation in class. The focus was on group and pair work in English language classes.

The specific purpose of the study was to:

- find out the attitude of the teachers towards the innovation of using group work/pair work techniques.
- evaluate perceptions of the teachers and students regarding the effectiveness of collaborative teaching.
- investigate whether group and pair work is effective for teaching English at the undergraduate level in the existing situation.
- make suitable recommendations based on the data.

To investigate the present state of group work is extremely important to find out whether it is applicable or not. The study was of great importance for the teachers teaching at undergraduate level and for development of new books for teaching of English at undergraduate level. The study was also important to find out the present status of group work and pair work in teaching of English at undergraduate level.

It is expected that the results of this study will reveal important insights for the teachers and curriculum developers which can become an influencing factor in the subsequent development of new books for students at different levels and for modified teachers training facilities for college teachers.

Literature Review

Language teaching came into its own as a profession in the last century. The period from the 1950s to the 1980s has often been referred to as “The Age of methods”, during which a number of quite detailed prescriptions for language teaching were proposed and each method has in turn fallen out of favor and has been replaced with a new one. Since the 1960s, there has been an increasing attempt in research on teaching and learning and types and quantities of the relative amount of participation by the teacher and students (Chaudron, 1993).

Group work and pair work started getting attention of educationist in the 70s. In 70s educationists were concerned about increasing teacher talking time in language classes. During the 1980s and 1990s the development of communicative language teaching brought an important change in the role of students (Nunan & Lamb 1996) Working together is worthwhile as “pair and group work immediately increase the amount of students talking time” (Harmer, 1991). Researchers are convinced that the students who take the initiative in learning learn more things and learn better than those who sit at the feet of teachers passively waiting to be taught (Knowles as cited in Hedge, 2000). Researchers reported that it is a source of intrinsic motivation for students as working in groups is fun for them. It provides the students with the opportunity to

communicate with each other to share “suggestions, insights, feedback about successes, and failures” Researchers also claim that a teacher’s dominance in class makes it dull and it kills the students’ interests (Kundo & Tutto, 1989).

In Pakistan, traditionally the lecture method is used by the college teachers for teaching English. The classes are overcrowded and teacher student interaction is rare. In fact, here the teacher acts like a dictator not a facilitator. Ellis (1994) noted that generally students successfully learn in natural settings. Moreover, group activities develop higher levels of thinking than the traditional lecture approach and help to retain knowledge. Discussion may even help to inspire active learning.

Ellis (1994) was of the view that students are more motivated to engage in further communication when they have more opportunities to speak. Researchers observed often that Asian students are not trained to speak up, they prefer other people to take the limelight (Richards and Renandya, 2002). “In some cultures, students are very anxious about making mistakes in front of others” (Weaver and Hybles, 2004). Harmer (1991) claimed that group and pair work allows students to work in a conducting and facilitating environment. Group work claims a number of advantages as Gower (1987) has noted that it stimulates the learners’ experience of various types of interaction and helps to generate a more relaxed and cooperative classroom atmosphere.

In Pakistan, the criterion for the teachers’ selection for public sector colleges is holding a masters degree in that subject .However knowing a subject is one thing and teaching it is another. Teachers who are not trained cannot teach effectively as they do not know the techniques of teaching. Tiberius (1995) was of the opinion that group work can fail due to several reasons; he mentioned students being exam oriented, teachers’ authoritative role in class and their lack of interest due to incompetence to handle group work. In addition Weaver and Hybles (2004) believed that “all the students do not like discussions, some find them boring and time consuming” (p.349). Although it is during group and pair work that a lot of real learning takes place since the students can use language really to communicate with one another. There are a number of causes of difficulty for teachers, which include the adaptation of new textbooks, the introduction of pedagogical reforms that teachers have not been trained to implement and the new teacher – learner relationship in the classroom. If we consider all these causes, they all well fit into public and private sector educational institutions at the undergraduate level in Pakistan.

Despite being an important part of collaborative teaching and learning, group work is generally neglected in public and private sector institutions of Pakistan. This study plans to investigate the causes of teachers’ reluctance to use group work strategies in language classes and to find out students perceptions and their attitudes towards group and pair work at undergraduate level. The study tried to find out if there is any correlation between the beliefs of students and beliefs of teachers regarding the effectiveness of group work and pair work.

Research Methodology

The strategy of research was a survey. Population was diverse therefore stratified random sampling technique was adopted. 300 students studying at undergraduate level in colleges of Karachi and 75 teachers from the same colleges were selected for the study. The sample was selected from all the teachers and students at public and private sector degree colleges in Karachi.

Questionnaire and interview protocol were designed to collect data.

Results and Discussion

The period from 13 to 20 years of human growth and development, called the adolescence, is the most crucial period in the life of human beings. This period is full of turmoil and conflict. At the same time the adolescent is eager to interact and builds new relationships. They try to have more liberty to develop their own potentialities. This clarifies the picture why most of the students at undergraduate level prefer group work. Group work provides them activities to interact in a fresh environment. It also provides them opportunities to express themselves and as a result they have an outlet for emotions and can socialize while studying in class.

Majority of the students in the study were students of English medium at this level. This opens another door for discussion. Bruce stated that language facilitates as an intellectual resource (cited in Skinner, 1996). One who has command over the language can communicate the message easily and effectively. Group work is a class-management strategy and if presentation, process, ending and feed back all are well organized then it gives positive results. It is important that the methodology and expectations are thoroughly thought through and decided earlier. In fact the trained teacher can conduct group work better than the untrained teacher. The results of the teachers' data showed that all the teachers were not trained in communicative methods and could not set clear objectives. They kept the objectives very broad which were not always attainable thus failed to get positive feedback. One of the male teachers was a good example although he was willing to use group work he had some reservations while using this strategy. Another teacher felt that group / pair work led to unrealistic expectations but teachers 10 who was a trained teacher with 15 years experience of teaching, was keen to do group / pair work. Teachers who had done training were quite clear about the use of group and pair work in class and defined their group/pair work strategy clearly. At this point, we come to some kind of understanding about the role of their personal beliefs, perceptions and their training that classroom organization is dependent on subjective judgments. A female teacher gave the proof of reluctance for group work by labeling the feelings of students nervous and reluctant to use English. In her interview, she pointed out that students could not be taught through group and pair work because they had never been taught like that before and forgot the fact that language teaching is always I+1. A few teachers rejected the possibility of success of group work. The teachers gave different reasons for their belief, some of the reasons were, lack of resources, students use mother tongue during group work, lack of trained teachers, pattern of final examination does not support group work, lengthy syllabus, discipline problem due to noise generated during group activities.

Generally in our colleges there is a feeling that students are less interested in activities other than those that would lead to the award of a degree. Surprisingly there was a difference in the opinion between students and teachers. Teachers complained that students were exam oriented but students responses prove that they are not, Therefore, it was a perception of teachers which is not according to the needs of the students. It was proved that "Pair and group work can also be problematic in class rooms where there is a mismatch between the expectations of the teachers and those of the students" (Nunan & Lamb, p. 143). Language learners differ from one another and a learner centered-approach must inevitably acknowledge these differences and their implications in course design and teaching methodology (Tudor. 1996). The areas of effectiveness mentioned by some teachers were joint reading tasks. Teachers also mentioned oral skills practice but few Teachers stressed most on writing which is a complex skill therefore required an advanced level of knowledge. All the teachers and students agreed that group work maintains interest in class.

Teacher 01 thought that students were not willing to take part whereas Teacher 03 , with more than 25 years experience, complained that students used mother tongue during group work and she could not manage to make students converse in English. A few teachers with less than five years experience, could not handle noise in class and perhaps that was because of being relatively less experienced in teaching, because "group work, by its nature, is designed to generate noise" (Nunan & Lamb p. 14, 1996). Generally all students felt that group and pair work was beneficial for learning English but when we asked the teachers the same question they gave different answers, Teachers mentioned large classes, mixed ability, examination system, a lack of English language proficiency of the students as limitations. Teachers complained about the time available for completion of the syllabus. Teachers could not give any concrete solution to the problem but one teacher was probably right when she said that untrained teachers do cosmetic group work.

In Pakistan generally classes in colleges are large (100+) Here students are mixed ability groups with varied socio-economic backgrounds and it is very difficult to satisfy these students with the traditional teaching methods. The question about logistics was included keeping in mind some complaints about wastage of time in group work. Students were mostly aware that the organizational strategies used with them were beneficial to them, and the teachers thought that logistics of group work did not affect their work. No one had any problem with the logistics and all of them felt it is for useful purposes. However a teacher pointed out that it was not easy to successfully conduct group work. She believed that it was important to be physically close to the students. The seating arrangements in colleges do not allow teachers to come physically close to the students. For evaluation nearly all the teachers judged students verbally.

Most of the teachers failed to explain the procedure of group and pair work. Teachers need to think about the purpose of the task, particularly as it relates to the overall curriculum goals (Nunan & Lamb, 1996).

Conclusion and Recommendations

It was concluded that group work and pair work is best used when it is not the only classroom interaction pattern, but when it is combined with other strategies. The large multilevel class works better when we provide a great deal of variety in teaching. Nunan (1993) stressed the

point that “Cooperative learning teams are deliberately heterogeneous” (p. 35). Teachers can plan their lessons to include teachers-centered work; individual work and pair work as well as group work. Often the teachers need to encourage students to participate or give suggestions about how students may proceed in an activity especially when there is a silence or when they are confused about what to do next. The teacher might need to prompt the students with information they have forgotten.

Students need to be trained to work in group settings. They need to recognize the importance of communication in class. At Intermediate level the text books do not support CLT, so the students are not trained in group and pair work. In a mixed ability class where the target language is the only common language of the group, the use of mother tongue is not generally a problem Hess (2001) believed that what teachers can do is to constantly help them to stick to the target language. Teaches constantly mentioned the problem of large classes. However, in large multilevel classes, group work is obviously a key element as it enables students to learn from one another (p. 112). Sarwar (as cited in Hall and Hewings, 2001) advised that teachers in Pakistan should accept the fact that class size will not be reduced in near future. Hall and Hewings (2001) supported the view that “the acceptance of this reality can help a teacher to overcome the psychological barrier that the interactive approach/activities cannot be used in large classes” (p. 135). The data supplemented the outcomes of other studies, and provides implications for teacher training, competence and course design for school and the intermediate level.

The English text book introduced by the Karachi University at the under graduate level is CLT based. It can be a very effective book if it has a teacher’s guide. In the absence of a teacher’s guide it is not possible for untrained teachers to conduct group/pair work because it is always important to plan carefully, how and when to conduct a group/pair work in each lesson. Teachers need to specify the objectives of the lesson and make a number of pre instructional decisions. Being clear about the intended purpose or objective of the discussion helps the teacher to plan the topic and format. This is important for the success of group work (Siraj, 1995). According to Callahan and Clark (1982), there is no student who cannot learn in group and pair work. The teacher’s main task is to maintain the pupil’s attention, interest and involvement in the learning activities. Teachers do not have to simply keep students busy in a number of activities, but promote learning. Only those teachers who have a belief in effectiveness of group work can conduct it effectively Therefore according to Reynolds “teachers or trainers uninterested in understanding what happens in groups should probably stick to alternative methods” (p. 13). Indeed, in our large mixed ability classes (public and private sector) we need variety in teaching to satisfy all the students.

This study had some limitations yet it is hoped it will be helpful for teaching English at undergraduate level in colleges of Pakistan. The study is expected to be helpful for EFL teaching in different settings as well as for other subject areas. Although the study was carried out in the public and private sector context, the suggestions put forward are of some value in other institutional settings and other subject areas as well. It is suggested that there should be a change in the English curriculum at the Matric (SSC) and Intermediate (HSC) levels; it should be made more communicative, so that students become used to group and pair work strategy of class management.

Several areas still need to be investigated in order to completely understand the effects of group and pair work at the undergraduate level in the public and private sector colleges. This project was simply a preliminary study that investigated the effectiveness of group and pair work at the undergraduate level. Most of the students in this study were from middle class families with a better social status and they had an English medium background. Another study should be conducted with students from a different socio-cultural background for more generalized results. Results are expected to be different if study is conducted at the post graduate level or in professional colleges.

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