

5 Improving the Effectiveness of Group Work

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1 INTRODUCTION

The Basic Education curriculum for English in Oman makes wide use of group work. While much is said about the advantages of this way of learning, group work also offers, as my own experience shows, several challenges. The purpose of this study is to examine the use of group work in a Basic Education context in order to seek ways of addressing some of these challenges.

2 GROUP WORK

2.1 Advantages of Group Work

Group work is a teaching and learning technique where the learners work in small groups to do activities in classrooms. It has many advantages and here I discuss these in terms of educational advantages and social advantages.

There are many educational advantages of group work for teachers and learners. According to Harmer (2001) group work increases the amount of talking individual students can do. Lightbown & Spada (1999) also report research which suggests that in group work learners ask and answer more questions and have more opportunities to communicate with less inhibition. Another advantage of group work, as pointed out by Scott & Ytreberg (1990), Williams & Burden (1997) and Lynch (1996), is that the learners support each other. Moreover, group work promotes learner independence.

There are also several social advantages of group work. Littlewood (1981) says that group work creates social interaction and this provides opportunities for learners to develop good relationships with one another. Denton (1997) says that group work creates a social identity among learners - i.e. it allows them to feel part of a group who are working towards a common goal. Group work may also develop a sense of social responsibility in learners, for, as Richards & Rodgers (2001: 196) explain, "... group members feel that what helps one member helps all and what hurts one member hurts all".

2.2 Disadvantages of Group Work

Like any other technique, group work also has some disadvantages for teachers and learners. Ur (1996) and Denton (1997) say that group work can be very noisy. This may make it hard for teachers to control the class and also prevent learners from focusing on what they are doing. As Rose (1998) says, group work also presents the teacher with organizational problems, especially when classes are large. Another potential disadvantage of group work in foreign language classrooms is that the learners may interact in the L1.

3 METHOD

3.1 Research Questions

The aims of this study were to examine the use of group work in teaching English in Grade 5 Basic Education classes and to consider ways of addressing some of the challenges group work raises in this context. I approached these aims through three research questions:

1. According to teachers of English, what are the advantages of group work in Grade 5 Basic Education classes in Oman?
2. According to these teachers, what are the disadvantages of group work in the same context?
3. How can we improve the way group work is used in Grade 5?

3.2 Participants

There were two groups of participants in this study. The first were a group of 60 teachers of English working with Grade 5 classes in Basic Education schools in different parts of Oman. The second group of participants were seven learners from one of my own Grade 5 classes. They had been learning English for five years and had always been seated in groups (rather than in rows). All seven learners were boys and represented a range of abilities.

3.3 Data Collection

This study was a form of action research (see Burns, 1999) through which I examined an issue relevant to my own teaching (i.e. group work) in order to improve my work in relation to that issue. I collected data through a questionnaire and classroom observation.

3.3.1 Questionnaire

I designed a simple questionnaire (see Appendix) to elicit teachers' views on the advantages and disadvantages of group work. I distributed 68 questionnaires to Grade 5 Basic Education teachers of English in various parts of Oman and 60 were returned.

I conducted a content analysis of the responses in order to identify common themes in these. The frequency with which each theme was mentioned in the responses was calculated and used to construct the charts I present in the findings section below.

3.3.2 Classroom Observation

After analysing the questionnaire data and considering in particular the problems associated with group work, I analyzed the use of group work in my own lessons. I first video recorded two lessons in order to identify the kinds of problems which occurred. I then tried out ways of addressing these problems in three further lessons and used field notes to describe what happened. Taking notes, as Burns (1999) suggests, is a useful way of collecting qualitative data about lessons.

4 FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

I will present and discuss the findings from each phase of data collection in turn here.

4.1 Questionnaire

The questionnaire asked Grade 5 teachers for their views on the advantages and disadvantages of group work.

4.1.1 Advantages of Group Work

Teachers were asked to list advantages for teachers and for learners. Figure 1 shows the most common responses provided by teachers. The two most common advantages for teachers mentioned were that it saves them time and that it reduces the effort they need to make (possibly because in group work learners take on some responsibility for learning). Harmer (2001) does note that group work can be a time-saving device for teachers. This would seem to be an important consideration in Oman, where teachers feel that classes are large (30-40 learners); teachers are unable to give every learner individual attention and group work helps all learners to receive some support from others, while also allowing the teacher to focus on those learners who need particular support.

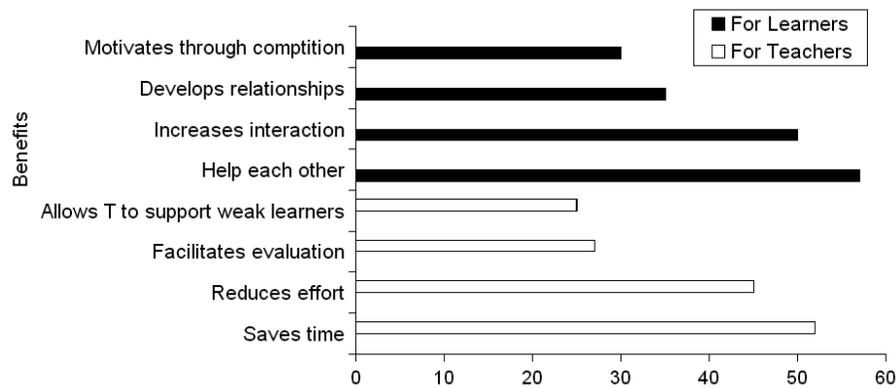


Figure 1: Advantages of group work for teachers and learners

In terms of the benefits for learners, the most common answer teachers gave was that group work encourages learners to help one another. Many also said that group work increases interaction among learners. These two advantages of group work are regularly mentioned in the literature (e.g. Ur, 1996). Almost half the teachers also referred to the competitive dimension of group work; this reflects the way groups are commonly used in Basic Education classes, where each group is encouraged to work harder or faster than the others, possibly motivated by a 'reward' at the end.

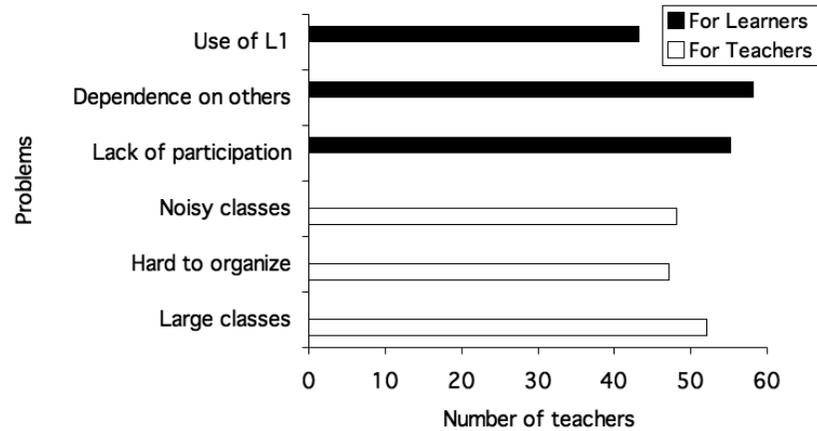


Figure 2: Disadvantages of group work for teachers and learners

4.1.2 Disadvantages of Group Work

Figure 2 shows the disadvantages of group work mentioned by teachers. Again, these are divided into disadvantages for teachers and learners. Three major problems for teachers were widely mentioned; classes are large, they are hard to organize into groups, and group work is noisy. The first issue mentioned here seems to lie behind the other two. As Vale & Feunteun (1995) argue, classes which have a large number of learners need special organization and the teachers who answered the questionnaire would seem to agree this is the case in using group work in Grade 5 classes.

The teachers also mentioned three key disadvantages of group work from the learners' point of view: lack of participation by all learners, dependence by some learners on the work of others, and the use of the L1. These problems are noted in the literature; for example, Harmer (2001) says that some learners do not participate and some others dominate during group work .

4.2 Observation

4.2.1 Video

I video recorded two lessons; during the first the learners were too excited and distracted by the camera, so this analysis draws only on the second video recording

as this represented a more natural lesson. As noted earlier, the observation focused on a group of seven learners.

The analysis of the video highlighted some problems in the group work in the lesson. I noticed that two weak learners did not participate with the others in one of the three activities. Moreover, although there were seven learners in the group, they worked in groups of three or four or sometimes even in pairs. There was some noise during the group work. Moreover, they used the L1 frequently in all the group work activities in the lesson. The problems I observed reflect those mentioned by teachers in their questionnaire responses. I now report on the three lessons in which I tried to address these problems.

4.2.2 Lesson 1

In the first lesson, I was trying to address problems related to the organization of groups in large classes and to the noise in group work. Dunne & Bennett (1990: 27) recommend that “as a general rule, groups of three or four are preferable to larger groups”. Therefore, I adopted this view to solve the problem of large groups, but this created another problem – an increase in the number of groups in the class. I followed Vale & Feunteun’s (1995) advice here and arranged the groups around the class in a U-shape.

My observations showed that putting the groups in a U-shape around the classroom made it look more organized. Having groups of 3-4 learners (rather than the usual 6-7) also allowed the groups to work more effectively. Also, learners were able to come to the front of the class to write on the board without difficulty and I was able to move freely around the groups. There was still a certain amount of noise, but not as much as in the lesson I video recorded. Group work will, as Harmer (2001) notes, always involve some noise.

4.2.3 Lesson 2

In this lesson my focus was on finding ways to encourage more participation by learners during group work. Building on the previous lesson, I formed groups of 3-4 learners. This, I felt, would immediately encourage more participation. For the seven learners I was focusing on, I also decided to assign roles to different individuals. The more able learners were asked to be the group leaders, the weaker learners were asked to be the writers (who write the answers of the group in the textbook and on the board), while the remaining learners were to present the oral answers of the groups when I asked for feedback.

My observations showed that the above strategies seemed to allow all learners to participate in both group work activities in this lesson. The group leaders explained the activities, the writers wrote down the group’s answers, while the other learners answered my questions when I asked for their group’s answers. Giving learners a specific role seemed to be a useful way of encouraging them all to participate.

4.2.4 Lesson 3

The focus of the next lesson was reducing the use of the L1 by the learners during group work. In addition to using strategies from the previous lessons, such as small groups, in this case I also based the group work around a task. Nunan (1988: 10) defines this as “a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused in meaning”. In other words, tasks encourage learners to use the L2 communicatively.

The task involved guessing the kind of animal by asking questions about it. There were two preparatory activities for learners to practise asking the kinds of questions needed in the task (e.g. what colour is it? what does it eat?), then in the main activity the learners had to ask similar questions to work out the names of animals. The group leader knew the answers (he had an answer sheet) and the other group members asked him the questions and had to guess the animal.

My observations of the learners I was focusing on showed that in their two groups the leaders explained the instructions in Arabic. The learners also used the L1 to form questions. In the second preparation activity, the leaders again explained in Arabic, but more English was used to ask about the animals. In the main activity, the L1 was used for instructions and to translate some single words, but the learners mostly used English in trying to work out which animals were hidden.

The L1 was used throughout here by the group leaders to explain the activities to the rest of the learners. I do not feel this is problematic and can mean that learners have a clear understanding of what they need to do. During the activities, the amount of L1 used seemed to decrease as the activity became more communicative; thus, in the main task, where the communicative purpose was greatest (the learners had to work out which animals were hidden), learners used English much more than Arabic. Harmer (2001) says that communicative tasks give the learners a desire to talk using the L2, and this seemed to be the case here.

4.2.5 Summary of Observations

I identified a number of strategies for improving the use of group work in my Grade 5 class. These were: (a) having the learners in groups of 3-4; (b) organizing the groups in a U-shape around the classroom; (c) giving learners specific roles to carry out during the group work; and (d) using communicative tasks during group work. Noise remained a feature of group work throughout, but as long as this does not exceed reasonable limits and is caused by learners working on the task, then this would not seem to be a serious problem.

5 CONCLUSION

I must acknowledge here that I studied a small group of learners, in Grade 5, over a small number of lessons. The teachers who completed the questionnaire may also not have been representative of Grade 5 teachers generally. However, I believe that the findings of this study are relevant to teachers at any level who are using group work. The questionnaire findings highlighted common views about key

advantages and disadvantages of group work, while my explorations of group work in my class identified strategies for responding to some of these disadvantages. Even in contexts where teachers face different problems in using group work to those discussed here, this research may suggest ways in which they might use action research to investigate these problems and to find local solutions to them. This research has not, of course, resolved all the challenges I face in using group work in my teaching; however, now I am more confident in my ability to make group work effective for my learners and, where problems arise, to seek solutions to them.

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APPENDIX: QUESTIONNAIRE

What are the advantages and disadvantages of group work:

1. For the teacher?

Advantages	Disadvantages

2. For the learners?

Advantages	Disadvantages