

# 6 Promoting Oral Interaction Through Group Work

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

The starting point for this study was a desire to encourage my learners to interact more in English during lessons. This desire stemmed from my belief that such classroom interaction would enhance the L2 learning process. The context for the study was a large mixed ability General Education Grade 7 class, where few opportunities for classroom interaction in English among learners were built into the curriculum. Using an action research approach, I explored the use of group work as a way of increasing such opportunities for my learners.

## 2 INTERACTIVE TALK IN L2 LEARNING

### 2.1 Communicative Language Teaching

Communicative language teaching (CLT) aims to promote meaningful and interactive use of language in the classroom. The characteristics of CLT have been widely discussed in the literature (e.g. Cameron, 2001; Harmer, 2001) and the following are commonly mentioned: (a) it involves learners in communicative activities; (b) these activities involve some real-time processing and production of language; (c) CLT provides plenty of speaking practice for all learners; (d) it involves some interaction; (e) learners have the freedom to use all their available language resources; (f) learners focus more on meaning than on forms (and hence language errors are tolerated); (g) CLT stimulates a genuine desire for learners to talk. These characteristics influenced the choice of activities I used in this study to promote group work.

### 2.2 Advantages of Group Work

Many writers talk about the benefits of group work in L2 classrooms (e.g. Ur, 1996; Harmer, 2001). It is a flexible strategy through which learners can engage in a variety of communication activities which promote L2 learning. It also creates more

opportunities for learners to talk (Halliwell, 1992) and in particular helps shy learners who may not speak up in whole class situations. Group work also promotes learner autonomy by allowing learners to make decisions on their own (Lynch, 1996). A number of these benefits are highlighted in a document published by the Ministry of Education in Oman (Ministry of Education, 2005).

### **2.3 Disadvantages of Group Work**

Although group work can help learners develop their speaking skills, it does also have some disadvantages. Moon (2000) refers to various possible problems that can arise during group work - noise, domination by individual learners, confusion caused by learners' unfamiliarity with group work, and excessive use of the L1. Lynch (1996) and Harmer (2001) also suggest that not all learners enjoy working in groups and that group work takes more time to complete and needs more monitoring by the teacher.

### **2.4 Designing Group Work**

Here I outline a number of suggestions for using group work effectively and which I considered in using group work in this study: (a) group work must be planned carefully, so that topics and tasks are of interest to the learners; (b) if group work is new to the learners, they should be given a clear explanation of what they are expected to do and why they are being asked to work in groups; (c) different ways of forming groups should be considered, such as according to friendships or abilities; Moon (2000: 13), for example, suggests using mixed ability groups so that "children with stronger oral skills could support those who are weaker"; (d) learners may be motivated to participate in group work if there is a competitive element to the activity; (e) at the end of the activity, learners need to receive feedback on their work, though some element of peer feedback (from learners themselves) can further encourage learner autonomy; (f) finally, to constantly improve their work, teachers can regularly monitor and evaluate the processes and products of group work in their lessons.

## **3 METHOD**

### **3.1 Research Questions**

The aim of the study was to investigate ways of helping my Grade 7 learners interact more in the classroom through group work. My specific research questions were:

1. To what extent do my learners interact and co-operate during group work?
2. How can I promote more oral interaction in English through group work?

### **3.2 Context**

The context for the study was a mixed ability General Education Grade 7 class consisting of 36 learners. These learners were in their third year of learning English and were 12-13 years old. English lessons were 45 minutes long and the course book used was *Our World Through English* (OWTE). This course book consists mainly of

activities designed for individual work. Group work was not used in the teaching of the learners' other school subjects and, in my school, noise in the classroom was generally viewed as a sign of lack of control by the teacher.

### **3.3 Data Collection**

#### **3.3.1 Observation**

The first method used to collect data in this study was observation. This is a useful technique for analyzing classrooms events (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000) and for understanding what works and what does not. There are a number of advantages of using observation for classroom research: (a) it can be done naturally - teachers can be observed whilst doing their normal work; (b) it can be done frequently, as teachers are in the classroom regularly; and (c) observation can have a specific focus, thus allowing teachers to study a particular aspect of their work.

Drawing on the characteristics of CLT discussed earlier, I designed some speaking activities to be done in groups. I then taught these activities in three lessons whilst being observed by a colleague. The observer completed an instrument that I prepared (see the Appendix). This was a rating scale which contained a number of Likert scale statements about the interaction in the one group of learners I was focusing on. This instrument also provided space for additional comments by the observer.

#### **3.3.2 Research Diary**

Data here were also collected through a research diary. McNiff, Lomax & Whitehead (1996) say that a research diary is particularly useful in action research because it can shed light on connections between the teacher's actions and what learners do and learn. In my diary, I kept detailed notes about the lessons which were observed. I wrote in my diary immediately after each lesson in order to note down my thoughts and feelings about the use of group work in the lesson (e.g. how successful the group work had been).

## **4 FINDINGS**

The action research in this study involved cycles of action, observation, and reflection; I worked through these cycles for each observed lesson before moving on to the next. Below I present the findings for each cycle in turn.

### **4.1 Cycle 1**

#### **4.1.1 Action**

In this first cycle I modified a lesson from the course book to make it a group work activity. The learners worked in six groups of six. The group work activity was a role play in which learners chose cards from a pile and took on the roles written on these cards (e.g. hotel guests and a receptionist). They asked and answered questions using 'Can I...?' (e.g. in the hotel, guests could ask 'Can I have dinner in my room?').

#### **4.1.2 Observation**

The data collected for this lesson indicated that the noise levels were high and that much of the talk was in Arabic. In addition, the more able learners dominated - the observer wrote that “the three pupils on my left hand side take the cards and keep them. The other pupils try to see the cards”. Not all learners had the opportunity to participate in the role play and most contributions in English were very short. There was also some confusion about who would take on the different roles.

#### **4.1.3 Reflections**

The outcomes of this first cycle were not surprising. These learners were not used to working in groups and were thus unsure of what to do. The size of the groups – six learners – may also have led to too much noise and also made it hard for all learners to participate in the role plays. For the next cycle, therefore, I decided to have smaller groups, to let the learners decide how to form groups, and to try to make the lesson more enjoyable.

### **4.2 Cycle 2**

#### **4.2.1 Action**

In this lesson I used a group work vocabulary game. I wrote dashes on the board (representing the letters of a word) and the groups took it in turns to guess a letter from it. They were awarded points for correct letters and for guessing the whole word. In response to the first observation, I made the groups smaller (five learners each), allowed the learners to choose their groups and to name them, and (by using a game) introduced an element of fun and competition.

#### **4.2.2 Observation**

The results here suggested that some learners were still dominating in the groups; as the observer wrote, in the group I focused on, “one pupil takes the lion share of the task”. There was some co-operation but learners were not always ready to help one another (especially the more able learners). The L1 was still widely used. Nonetheless, the learners were interested in the game and seemed happier working with individuals they had chosen to be with.

#### **4.2.3 Reflections**

I was pleased the learners were able to form groups themselves, and happy with the degree of interaction. Learners organized themselves according to ability and they seemed more comfortable with this. Lightbown & Spada (1999: 168) say that “research shows that learners do not produce any more errors in their speech when talking to learners at similar levels of proficiency than they do when speaking to learners at more advanced levels”. If this is the case, and learners are happier working in same-ability groups, then this way of forming groups would seem useful in my context.

I was not satisfied, though, with the extent to which the L1 was still being used. Increasing the amount of English used during group work needed to be the key focus of the next cycle of the study.

### **4.3 Cycle 3**

#### **4.3.1 Action**

The third lesson was a group story-telling activity. I started the lesson by asking the learners to tell me about problems they had had during a trip and used their ideas to elicit relevant vocabulary. Then, in groups of five, the learners used pictures I provided and some key words to make a story about a trip full of unfortunate incidents that a boy went on. They had to retell their stories orally and also write them on posters to display in class.

#### **4.3.2 Observation**

The data for this cycle showed that the group were able to divide the task up among themselves and also took turns to speak. In fact, all group members contributed orally. There was evidence, too, that learners helped one another with vocabulary and gave each other feedback. The handout was kept in the centre of the group and no one learner dominated. In my diary, I noted that I “heard an interesting discussion .... I felt I have never heard them talk before in this way. They were all talking, smiling”. The learners appeared motivated to do the task and produced some interesting stories.

#### **4.3.3 Reflections**

This was the most successful of the three group work activities I used in this study. The nature of the activity itself – story writing – made a difference here, though the way groups were formed also helped. The learners were now more familiar with group work and had a clearer understanding of how to behave; thus they took on roles in the group, used turn-taking strategies, and worked co-operatively, as a team. The activity also gave them opportunities to use English and they did so while they were planning their stories in groups but mostly when they retold their stories and wrote them on posters.

## **5 DISCUSSION**

This study has identified a number of ways in which I can promote oral interaction more effectively through group work. I can do this by:

- Not allowing the groups to be too large (five learners per group worked well here);
- Allowing learners to choose who to work with (in this study learners preferred to work with other learners of the same ability);
- Encouraging them to speak English as much as possible;
- Varying the membership of groups when necessary to keep them dynamic and to avoid domination by particular learners;
- Using group work tasks which relate to learners’ own experiences;

- Not over-monitoring learners, as this can inhibit their oral production;
- Using tasks which give learners a purpose to speak English;
- Introducing an element of fun and competition.

There is also evidence in this study that L2 learning can be supported when the teacher uses English in class, displays English around the classroom (e.g. through posters), provides sufficient practice, prepares learners for group work by introducing the vocabulary needed, and uses a variety of activities, such as role plays, games, and story telling.

I have also learned from this study that learners have more confidence to use English when they can help each other, when they have to be self-reliant, when the teacher is not always present, when they are not being corrected all the time, and when they are not being tested or monitored.

## 6 CONCLUSION

The study has been very useful in enabling me to understand how I can use group work to promote oral interaction in my teaching. I am aware that I focused on one particular group of learners in one Grade 7 class, and that these findings cannot be applied to classrooms elsewhere. The kinds of issues I faced in using group work, though, are not unusual ones, and my conclusions will therefore be of interest to other teachers of English. Of particular value to me here have been the action research cycles which I followed; these allowed me to identify problems and to try out solutions over a number of lessons, increasing my understanding of group work as I moved from one cycle to the next. I would strongly recommend action research to teachers interested in learning more not just about group work but about any aspect of their work.

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## APPENDIX: OBSERVATION INSTRUMENT

Class observed: \_\_\_\_\_ Topic: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Circle the number you believe is appropriate for each statement according to your observation. The numbers indicate the extent of your agreement or disagreement. 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = somewhat disagree, 4 = neutral, 5 = somewhat agree, 6 = agree and 7 = strongly agree.

	A group's activity in a speaking lesson	To what extent	Comments
1	Every one in the group gets an opportunity to participate.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	
2	The group members divide the task between them.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	
3	They co-operate with each other.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	
4	They use L1 in conversation.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	
5	They use L2 in conversation.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	
6	The group members take different roles.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	
7	No one dominates the group.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	
8	They are involved in the group.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	
9	The materials help pupils to talk.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	