

Pair work - group work and factors that makes more students' engagement in speaking tasks of non-English major students at Thuongmai University

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Abstract: *There has been a common phenomenon that students tend to be passive and reluctant when it comes to speaking tasks. This phenomenon constitutes an enormous challenge for me as a teacher as to how to actively engage students in speaking activities. I hold the view that fluency involves practice as the pre-requisite; my students should be more engaged in speaking tasks so as to achieve fluency.*

The idea of enhancing speaking tasks in pair work/group work to promote learner engagement was reinforced. I carried out the study in the hope that its findings would serve as the grounds for me to design a variety of oral tasks for pair work/group work, consciously boosting learner engagement and ultimately promoting their speaking skills.

Keywords: *Factors, engagement, pair work/group work, speaking skills, non-English major students, Thuongmai University*

1. Introduction

As a university lecturer of English, I am in charge of giving lessons to non-English major students at Thuongmai University. They tend to be passive and reluctant when it comes to speaking tasks. I suppose student engagement is central to effective learning, this urged me to do research on this topic of interest so that better insights into student engagement could be gained, giving rise to improved learning outcomes. And this led me to my research questions:

1. How can I encourage my students to become more engaged in speaking tasks by the use of pair work/group work activities?

2. What other factors should be taken into account to enhance student engagement in the classroom context?

I was particularly impressed by Life's (2011) investigation about the motivation of Northeast-Asian students, which reveals that "students generally enjoy group work more than individual work" (p.27). Life (2011) points out that students are likely to feel safer and more comfortable to interact in groups, especially among their peers. This feature was appealing to me and I wanted to use pair work/group work to engage my students in speaking tasks. Another notable journal article that jointly shaped my study was named "The contributions of Vietnamese learners of English to ELT methodology" by Tomlinson and Bao (2004) in an attempt to account for Vietnamese students'

reticence in class. As Tomlinson and Bao (2004) put it, "Learners want deeper social relationship in the classroom" (p.208). The relevant research-based findings reinforced my confidence in exploring my area of interest.

2. The study

2.1. Methodology

On the grounds of the literature review, I came to see that action research was just the research methodology that addressed my needs, suiting my research purpose of self-development. Ferrance (2000) is quoted as saying that "Action research is not about learning why we do certain things, but rather how we can do things better" (p.3).

2.2. Research instruments

To make the most of classroom observations, I attentively took field notes for "specified events" (Holly et al., 2005) i.e. when students were performing speaking tasks in pairs/in groups. I supposed observations with field notes would facilitate more profound interpretation for data analysis. In conducting interviews, I adopted the focus group form because of "its efficiency in eliciting a range of opinions in a limited amount of time" (Hinchey, 2008, p.82). The learners were also encouraged to give suggestions on their preferred ways of conducting such tasks and to express their further expectations of the classroom as to enhancing their engagement. In other words, student voices were heard. The language used for

the interviews was mostly English; however, the students were allowed the use of Vietnamese language whenever they felt needed to get their message across. An audiotape was used for recording the utterances to avoid misrepresentation.

2.3. Participants

The learners participating in this study were first-year students who do not major in English from two classes at TMU with 69 students in total; one class consisted of 35 students, the other 34. Their English levels were virtually pre-intermediate and intermediate. Most of them were in their twenties, 29 male and 40 female. I taught both classes communicative English.

2.4. Procedures

In the framework of this paper, however, I only mention the steps that one cycle of action research entails - plan, act, observe and reflect with a focus on the evaluation and self-reflection. With a research plan, I set out to implement the study and data collection. The qualitative data was collected over six weeks of the study (six times in each class on six different days). I conducted three group interviews for each class; five to six volunteer students involved in each interview. The interviews were guided by a list of semi-structured questions which were predominantly open-ended to elicit extensive information. Preliminary analyses were conducted during the process of data collection, and then in-depth analysis was implemented which engendered findings for reflection.

2.5. Data analysis

On the grounds of the two sources of collected data, I embarked upon an in-depth analysis in order to draw insights from the study. The prominent points arising out of the preliminary analyses were taken into account for incorporating into interview questions. The two overarching themes emerged as I sifted through and examined closely the data gathered, which were identified as prominent factors conducive to student engagement and interaction in the classroom, and students' further expectations of the classroom.

3. Findings

The investigation revealed the following insights being centered around the two abovementioned major themes.

3.1. Group work and working with peers

These findings are consistent with the findings from the relevant literature. Similar view is illustrated in Russell and Slater's (2011) findings that most students favor working in groups, particularly with members who share things in common. Russell and Slater (2011) are quoted as saying that, "Affective and

cooperative learning relationships among students are also important both in students' perceptions of belonging and in promoting effective learning" (p.3). In investigating the motivation among EFL university students in Northeast Asia, Life (2011) maintains that "Students generally enjoy group work more than individual work" (p.27). Tomlinson and Bao (2004) in their journal article namely "The contributions of Vietnamese learners" point out the student's real need for socialization in the classroom, and recommend incorporating more group work into classroom activities to increase interpersonal communication, reasoning that "learners need deeper social relationships in the classroom" (p.212).

3.2. More scaffolding for weak students in their output

Lacking confidence, weak students generally suffer from inhibition – a negative force in communicative engagement. Catering to this feature will motivate them and afford them the opportunities to initiate discourse with more proficient peers. Ellis (2005) contends that fruitful language learning requires opportunities for student output. In a research paper about culture of teaching in Vietnam, Lewis and McCook (2002) also suggest that "Creating a positive learning environment, and motivating less able students, were seen as essential parts of the teacher's role" (p.150). Details from my field notes reflected this noteworthy aspect:

Weak students seem reluctant to initiate interaction with peers; some of them appear to be fumbling for words to get their message across; a few seem cautious about their utterances for fear of making mistakes and losing face.

and some quotes from the conducted interviews:

Working with peers is comfortable...but the tasks are challenging.

... interesting but the teacher should give more support for group discussions

And the situation improved after I had provided more vocabulary and sentence structures to assist with student output. Data from my field notes was in consistent with this feature:

With the words, phrases, and sentence structures given upon request and written on the board, I could perceive a higher level of participation from weak students; there seemed no more taciturn; instead, the students, bright or slow, simply took turns giving a say.

3.3. Learner preferences and their preferred learning styles

The collected data from my classroom observations revealed that student enthusiasm and persistence with the tasks showed signs of fluctuation for different tasks. Since student preferred styles of learning may differ such as audio-visual, tactile, kinesthetic styles etc., students may be quite interested in some kinds of tasks and can be less so in some other kinds. This feature shares the same view with Life's (2011) findings which maintain "students prefer variety in instructional styles" (p.24). In an effort to draw teachers' attention to learner individual differences, Ellis (2005) also claims that adopting flexible teaching approach is strongly recommended.

3.4. Learner further expectations of the classroom

The learners also expressed their further expectations of the classroom pertaining to classroom climate. It was revealed that classroom climate significantly matters in facilitating an enjoyable and motivating learning atmosphere. Regarding classroom climate, teacher - student rapport, socialization with peers, and learning enjoyment are the factors that count. The following is a selection of some representative quotes from the interviews:

I want to learn and to enjoy the learning.

Learning only is hard and tiring without exchanging ideas with friends.

... interesting to interact with peers of the same interest.

... The class atmosphere should be fun and relaxing.

I am not so confident about my speaking skills. I hope teachers are tolerant with my mistakes.

We care much about how teachers feel about us...

Teachers' sense of humor makes the class more lively, and their empathy often encourages us to make more efforts.

I wish teachers are happy with us all the time.

Interestingly, the teacher-student relationship is stressed as a crucial factor that "fosters the engagement" of learners (Russell and Slater, 2011, p.12). In a research paper about teacher development in Vietnam, Baurain (2010) also highlights "the primacy of contextualized teacher - student relationships" in the Vietnamese contexts (p.172).

4. Recommendations

Pair work/group work for classroom activities should be frequently adopted so as to enhance student engagement. In my view, this is particularly suited to the Vietnamese classroom contexts where "family style" is commonly favored (Tomlinson and Bao, 2004). Second, as the findings imply, weak learners' motivation and engagement is also a noteworthy

factor attributable to engagement of the class as a whole. It is recommended that less proficient students should be attended to with more scaffolding for their output. Last but not least, classroom climate is also something that counts. Whereas there are a variety of factors which contribute to the classroom atmosphere, adopting flexible teaching approach can be of great contribution. In addition, giving students compliments and encouragement can be of great help. In terms of classroom climate, the teacher student relationship should also be fostered so as to enhance positive classroom atmosphere, boosting student engagement, particularly in speaking tasks.

5. Conclusion

This study may be subject to some limitations, though. First, the sample was small; only two classes with a total of 69 students. To some extent, the findings may be limited in scale of generalizability for other ESL/EFL contexts. On the other hand, there may exist some inherent shortcoming of the interview method.

I am concerned whether the data elicited from the interviews was all truthful. Regardless of my assertion that the informants' answers would in no way affect their grades or whatsoever, I am not certain that all of them were reassured enough to speak up their minds. Lastly, there exists a negative aspect that I encountered during conducting pair work or group work: The high use of Vietnamese language and "chit-chat" among pairs and groups. To conclude, despite all the limitations, the study remains of great values to me in my pursuit of ongoing professional development which I believe is worthwhile as strongly recommended by Cacciattolo and McKenna (2012) that "ESL/EFL teachers/facilitators regularly engage in professional development and up skilling as technologies change almost on an hourly basis" (pp.63-64). I strongly believe that conducting research afford me the opportunities to refine my teaching practice, giving rise to the teacher's ultimate goal of all strivings – student achievements.

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