



The role of pair work and group work in teaching speaking

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Abstract. This article deals with the problem of using group and pair work. Nowadays the ways of organizing the class while teaching speaking is one of the disputable questions. The teacher's role and responsibility depending on what is going to be practiced were discussed in this article.

Key words: Pair work, group work, communicative activities, facilitator, to manage, classroom activities, role, activities, promote, communication.

The process of teaching a foreign language is a complex one: as with many other subjects, it has necessarily to be broken down into components for purposes of study. There are three such components: (1) presenting and explaining new material; (2) providing practice; and (3) testing.

In the classroom, it is the teacher's job to promote these three learning processes by the use of appropriate teaching acts. Thus, he or she: presents and explains new material in order to make it clear, comprehensible and available for learning; gives practice to consolidate knowledge; and tests, in order to check what has been mastered and what still needs to be learned or reviewed. These acts may not occur in this order, and may sometimes be combined within one activity; nevertheless good teachers are usually aware which is their main objective at any point in a lesson.

Communicative activities are dealt with in a large number of methodology books and their classification is distinguished according to each author's point of view. However, all of them mention the same or similar communicative tasks but in different extent.

Every speaking lesson should be based on communicative activities which fulfill two important language learning needs. They encourage the learners to acquire language knowledge and prepare them for real-life language use. Achieving the outcome requires the participants to interact, which means not only speak with a person but also listen to what he or she is saying and react to it.

Pair work and group work present ways of organizing the class while teaching speaking. The teacher's responsibility is to choose a suitable communicative activity depending on what is going to be practiced – either



fluency or accuracy – and organize the students into pairs or groups. In some activities such as role plays and guessing games, pair work is essential. On the other hand, discussions and debates require group work and enable the students to express their opinions on a given topic within the group. After that, the spokesman of each group notifies the rest of the class about the conclusion they have reached. This may lead to a following discussion among groups and if the topic is amusing, the speaking lesson seems to be enjoyable for both students and the teacher, too.

There are many reasons for pair and group work to be used in the lessons. First of all, they provide the students with a lot more practice than working as a whole class. Students also feel more comfortable to speak to one or two people rather than the whole class and the teacher. Moreover, speaking to just a few people is closer to real-life situations.

Pair and group work allows each student to work at the pace of his or her small group or pair. The teacher is no more considered the only source of information but the students learn from each other. This creates opportunities for learners' knowledge to be shared. In order to be successful, learners need to become accustomed to using English without the teacher's permanent support. Therefore, working in pairs or groups helps them to build up their independence and confidence for further conversations.

Motivation of participants has been noted to be one of the most serious problems in group work. Some group members may be reluctant participants in assessment tasks and be uncommitted to the aims of the group. Motivational issues can arise as a result. Examples of motivational issues associated with group work are social loafing and "free riding". These issues have received considerable attention in the literature. Free-riding has also prompted what is called an "inequity based motivation loss where capable students reduce their input into a project when they experience free-riding. The relationship between the ethnic mix of students in a group and grades has also been the subject of discussion as a problem with group work tasks. An additional problem in the literature is the social dilemma of maximizing advantages to a group while being principally concerned with maximizing the advantages to oneself as an individual. These issues will be discussed in the sections that follow. In "Recommendations for implementing group work" a number of recommendations to deal with these problems are provided.

The advantages of pair and group work can be noticeable not only from the learner's but also the teacher's point of view. It provides the teacher with more time to work with weaker students and encourage them, by participating in a role play or discussion, to communicate. Teachers can also benefit from a great



availableness of different communicative activities being offered in bookshops and on the internet nowadays. The variety of materials for pair or group work speaking practice is praised by most of them and their use has proved to be very efficient for speaking skill improvement.

However efficient and useful pair and group work is, it may sometimes cause little problems while practicing speaking. According to Doff the noise belongs to these obstacles the teachers have to overcome during lessons. Usually the students themselves are not disturbed by the noise; it is more noticeable to the teacher observing pairs or groups. However, the noise created by pair and group work demonstrates learners' engagement in a speaking task and gives the teacher visual evidence of students' involvement. Considering this, the success in working in pairs or groups depends mainly on the students' and the teacher's approach.

Another fact Doff mentions is the difficulty to control the whole class during a communicative activity. To stop activity getting out of control, it is important to give the students clear instructions, define the speaking task clearly and set up a routine, so that students accept the idea of working in pairs or groups and know exactly what to do.

The teacher is a facilitator of students' learning and as such he has many roles to fulfill. Freeman describes him as *a manager* of classroom activities. In this role, one of his major EFL responsibilities is to set up activities that promote communication. During the communicative activities he acts as *a consultant* answering students' questions, offers advice and provides necessary language items.

One of the most important roles is to make sure that students know what they are supposed to practice and check if they do it effectively. These roles are called a conductor and a monitor. Although there is a great number of various activities which may be used in speaking lessons, their use would be confusing and pointless if they would not be logically organized. Being a good organizer should be an ability possessed by every skillful teacher.

Evaluating a group is a difficult task and the instructor should have a clear idea of how he/she wants to evaluate the group work. First, the instructor should decide what is being evaluated: the final product, the process, or both. Next, it is necessary to decide who assigns the grade: the students, the instructor, or both. Some faculty members assign each member of a group the same grade, which may promote unhappiness if some members devote more time and effort to the group and get the same grade. Some instructors assign each group member an individual grade, which may or may not foster competition within the group and may undermine the group solidarity. If the group is graded as a whole, it is suggested



that the project or presentation should not count for more than a small percentage of the student's final grade. If the aspect of process is going to be evaluated, it is important to give the students an opportunity to assess the effectiveness of their group. At the end of the process, they should be able to list their contributions, their group member's contributions, and the process as a whole. They should be able to identify the aspects that worked and the aspects that did not work. The student's group assessment allows the instructor to evaluate the group process and apply the most effective methods to future group projects.

In the aspect of assessment, it is vital that the students know and understand how they will be evaluated. One method used to convey this information is with a structured grading rubric. A rubric is a scoring tool which lists the criteria by which a paper or presentation will be graded. The rubric lists, not only the criteria by which the work is judged, but also the student's mastery of the material (Finson & Ormsbee, 1998). Stevens and Levi (2005) advocate the use of rubrics because they: convey expectations to the students, help students focus their efforts, improve student achievement, reduce grading time for the instructor and improve the effectiveness of feedback. If the instructor is interested in assessing the group process and final product, two separate rubrics need to be created. For the process, the evaluation criteria should represent the learning objectives for class and for the group. Process evaluation might include: attendance and participation in meetings, time management skills, active listening, evidence of cooperative behavior, and professionalism and engagement with the task. For evaluating the effectiveness of the product, a more concrete grading rubric might be necessary. The criteria can be outlined based on content, structure, organization, accuracy, thoroughness, and general mechanics. Rubrics can be helpful for both students and instructors; they outline expectations and allow instructors to assign grades on a more objective basis. Rubrics provide detailed breakdowns of points that are awarded for each criterion and how those points are awarded.

References

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