Pair and group work activities

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ABSTRACT: This article investigates the present study focused on the reasons of my students' reluctance to participate in PGWA and aimed at finding out some solutions for the problem.

KEYWORDS: Interaction, experience, whole class activities,work group,pair work.

INTRODUCTION

It get analyses of the research questions were as follows:

1. What were the perceptions and attitudes of my students towards pair work and group work activities?

2. What were the causes of their reluctance to take part in these activities?

3. How could I motivate them to get involved in pair work and group work activities?

4. How could I design more effective pair work and group work activities?

It is widely agreed by most language teachers that pair and group work activities (hereon PGWA) enable students to involve in learning actively and provide the students with the opportunity to communicate with each other. Most teachers believe that there aren't any more convenient forms to have students work on and experiment with the language than such tasks. Most of them share the idea expressed by Scrivene that "Language learning is a process that involves lots of attempts and errors along the way, and so it is very important to give learners opportunities to try out the language to feel it on their tongue, to experiment with putting words together, to make attempts that turn out to be unsuccessful or only partially successful and not to aim all the time, unrealistically, only for supposedly perfect exam-ready sentences." Most teachers agree that whole class teaching is less appropriate for communicative speaking activities and many students don't like speaking in front of their peers. Therefore, by many practitioners and researchers are suggested as perfect solutions for getting students involved in speaking activities in class because they reduce the anxiety level of students when compared with whole-class activities.

Context and problem

Nobody can ignore the value of using pair and group work activities to foster students' communicative skills in language classrooms. Having the same idea in mind, many coursebooks today contain suggestions for these activities. Being a strict follower of the idea that classroom interaction is an indispensable part of a good language classroom, I tried to include as many in my classroom practices as possible, but having a class so unwilling to take part in them was a very big disappointment for me. The unwillingness of my students to take part in such activities urged me to

investigate the pair and group work activities(PGWA)in my classes. I started to think about the causes of the problem and decided that a study would help me find out my students' perceptions and attitudes towards pair work and group work activities and causes of their reluctance to engage in them more. With the help of my findings I thought I would be able to work on ways of developing more effective PGWA.

Theoretical background

In recent years, with the advent of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), teaching and learning practices in the language classroom have gone through a transformation period. As a result of the effect of CLT practitioners have started to place more emphasis on interaction in the classroom as a means of language learning and use. Fluency activities, where the focus of learners is primarily on the communicative message rather than on displaying control over a specific target structure have become the main focus of language classrooms. The fact that fluency building activities and interaction are at the core of the communicative classroom has led to the widespread use of PGWA in language classrooms. The advantages of these activities have been discussed by many practitioners and researchers find such activities as "a form of learner activation that is of particular value in the practice of oral fluency", and explains the rationale behind using them as follows: "Learners in a class that is divided into five groups get five times as many opportunities to talk as in full-class organization". She also states that these activities for 165learner responsibility and independence, and can improve motivation and contribute to a feeling of cooperation and warmth in the class. According to

Long and Porter pair and group work activities:

• increase language practice opportunities

• improve the quality of student talk by shortening teacher talk(lockstep

teaching) time

• help individualize instruction

• promote a positive affective climate

• motivate learners

However, besides these potential advantages, there are also difficulties or

problems that teachers may have to deal with while applying these activitie summarizes these potential problems as follows: "Teachers fear they may lose

control, that there may be too much noise, that their students may over-use their mother tongue, and do the task badly or not at all. Some people – both learners and teachers – dislike a situation where the

teacher cannot constantly monitor learner language." Harmer (2001:116-117) adds some more disadvantages to the list. According to him, the chances of misbehavior are greater with pair work than in a whole-class setting. He states that pair and group work activities are not always popular with students because they sometimes prefer to interact with their teachers rather than with another learner who may be a linguistically weak student. He affirms that, especially in pair work, the actual

choice of paired partner can be problematic if students frequently have to work with someone they don't have a good relationship with.

MAIN PART

Bearing these potential problems in mind, researchers have come up with some practical solutions and suggested some ideas to produce more effective PGWA in class. According to Ur (1996:233), the success of group work relies on the surrounding social climate, how habituated the class is to using it, the selection of an interesting and stimulating task and careful organization." According to Scrivener (2012:223), "Nowadays, most teachers can see a real value in pair and group work. But even when teachers are convinced of the reasons for pair and group work, students may not always see the point." According to Scrivener (2012:223), the reason for this may simply be that they have not thought through or understood the value of it and suggests investing time in discussion of pair and group work activities in class to persuade reluctant students that PGWA are worth doing because they may have mixed feelings about working with a partner or about not having the teacher's attention at all times. He asserts that in this way, we, as teachers, can create "a joint code of conduct" and can come to agreement about when and how to use different student groupings. He adds that "when we know how our students feel about pairwork and groupwork we can then decide, as with all action research, what changes of method, if any, we need to make." Similar ideas are shared by many other practitioners who state that students need to be trained to work in group settings and recognize the importance of communication in class. It is most of the time the teacher's responsibility to show the value of an activity for language learning states, enhancing the learner's language-related values and attitudes does contribute to the motivation of the learner. Nobody can deny that the more motivated the learners are, the more eager they are to involve themselves in states that learner motivation makes teaching and learning immeasurably easier and more pleasant, as well as more productive, and agrees with idea that it is an important part of the teacher's job to motivate learners. According to this "long-term, sustained learning- such as the acquisition of L2 – cannot take place unless the educational context provides, in addition to cognitively adequate instructional practices, sufficient inspiration and enjoyment to build up continuing motivation in the learners." He claims that if we are not fortunate with the composition of our class group, student motivation will not be automatically there, and as teachers we need to try to actively generate positive attitudes toward L2 learnings . The research was conducted in an A1-level prep-class at Samarkand state Architectural and Civil engineering institute. questionnaire including 5 open-ended questions was administered to 23 students from my main course class to find out the attitudes of my students. Considering their level of English proficiency and hoping to get more data, the questions were in uzbek The data was analyzed by being put into categories depending on their frequencies in order to be able to identify the most prevailing ones. After the data analysis I developed some ideas which helped me improve my classroom practices related to PGWA and motivate

my students to engage in such action Ten students believed that these activities were a good opportunity for speaking practice. One student commented, 'Since we are learning English as a foreign language, we don't have much chance for speaking practice except for our classes.

Having pair work and group work activities in class gives us a chance

to practice the language in speaking. 'Eight students stated that they felt more confident and comfortable while working in pairs and small groups. Five students believed that these activities were good for their fluency because they spoke freely without caring about their mistakes, which is also

connected with speaking anxiety. Six students mentioned that these activities were good for peer learning, peer correction and better learning. One of the students stated that when she was corrected by a friend she learnt better. The findings of this study showed that if those students had been given the opportunity to practice speaking in pairs and small groups during their previous language studies, more students might have engaged in those activities. One of the students stated "before university, I didn't have a chance to do this because my teacher didn't give importance to it, but I wish I had." Therefore, teachers at high schools should include PGWA in their lessons more. This also may be one of the reasons why some of my students were reluctant to engage in these activities. Such activities were not something that they were accustomed to. In the light of my findings, and bearing in mind that students might not be used to pair and group work activities, I realized that I should follow a step by step procedure to get my students to become accustomed to and internalize these activities. This means long and careful planning before the lessons. It was also surprising to find out that the students were highly aware of the rationale behind such activities in spite of the fact that they were not used to such activities because 19 students responded that they enjoyed these activities.

The results also indicated that including PGWA in lessons is also an effective way to help students cope with their speaking anxiety. One student commented, "I like these activities, and they are better than speaking in front of whole class because I feel a bit anxious while speaking in front of the whole class. I forget about everything when I have to speak in front of a large group." Therefore, as teachers, we should try to include as many PGWA as possible in our classroom practices and should never give up on them as it is stated by Scriven, "Even if half of the students are not working as directed, that still leaves many who are. As a result, instead of one or two students doing something useful while the others sit back, 10 or 20 students are working constructively. Teachers must not drop pair work just because it is not successful for all students all the time." It shouldn't be ignored that PGWA help students build fluency by decreasing the anxiety level that they would have in front of a large group. Contrary to my conclusions based on my observations in class, only a limited number of students had negative attitudes towards such activities. This negative attitude of those students might be owing to the fact that they could not see the merit in pair and small group work activities. They felt that these activities were not worth doing because they believed that they were not taken seriously by students. At this point, I realized that it was the teachers' responsibility to convince the students to take part in these activities and help them see their value. As Harmer (2001, p.119) suggests, investing some time in discussion of pair and group work activities in class to persuade reluctant studentsthat pair and group work are worth doing may help teachers a lot.

When it comes to my own lessons, although the vast majority of the students (18 out of 23) expressed positive attitudes towards such activities, thepercentage of students engaging in them most of the time (13 students) decreased. This indicated that there were some problems related to my classroom practices besides some reasons related to other factors. It is a bit hard for a teacher to face and admit, but the results showed that the activities I applied in class were boring for my students and so they didn't want to take part in them. Dornyei (2007, p.719) emphasizes the importance of providing sufficient inspiration and enjoyment to build up continuing motivation in learners in everyeducational context by stating, "If the educational context cannot provide sufficient inspiration and enjoyment to build up continuing motivation in learner and unless we are singularly fortunate with the composition of our class group, student motivation will not be automatically there." I realized that my pair and group work activities had turned into a routine and were predictable, maybe sometimes because of strictly following the course book. This urged me to add an extra element to

help encourage students to participate willingly and actively. Especially adding a competitive element to work increased the motivation of my students.

DISCUSSIONS

Additionally, those students with a negative attitude towards such activities complained about the noisy and distracting classroom environment. For teachers, these activities are a major challenge in terms of classroom management skills. These are the times that we must be really alert about what is going on in our classrooms because the chances of misbehavior are greater with PGWA than in a whole-class setting. I had to revise my classroom management skills and monitoring techniques. Also, I realized the importance of convincing our students that having a considerable amount of noise in class during pair and group work activities is in the nature of such activities. Also, when giving reasons for not engaging in such activities, students mentioned the effect of their partners. I realized that I should be really careful while pairing and grouping our students. As teachers we should be very careful about the composition of the pairs and groups, by giving them a chance to experience the activities with a variety of group settings and not forcing them to work in a setting that they don't feel comfortable with. Teachers should form a clear profile of the relationships in their classes from the very first day, maybe by keeping notes about things happening in class. It was interesting to see that one of the students who expressed her dislike towards pair work activities stated that she got involved in these activities just for CPG (Classroom Participation Grade). This was also shared by another student with the same dislike, who answered the question related to engaging in these activities with "some of the time". This indicated that including in-class performance evaluation criteria in our end of term assessment criteria was effective to push some reluctant learners to engage in such activities in class. Also, having a checklist related to the performance of students throughout PGWA may push some reluctant learners to get them engaged in such activities.

Reflections

Through this study I learnt that without a systematic look at the things going on in our classes we miss points and may have false beliefs and prejudices toward our students. Prior to my study I had thought that my students had negative attitudes to PGWA and didn't want to participate in them. I realized that I had misinterpreted what was going on in my class. I came to the realization that they actually see the merit in such activities and they really want to take part in them. With the help of my research project, I had the chance to learn what they thought and how they felt, and identified the real source of the problem so as to be able to move towards excellence in my teaching practices. I had the chance to revise what I had already known and applied in my classes and added new techniques to my repertoire related to the application of pair and group work activities. I also realized that an enjoyable and stimulating learning environment is as important as providing students with cognitively adequate instructional practices. It would have been a huge fallacy if I had given up on pair and group work activities just depending on some false beliefs and prejudices.

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