

Implementing Group Work in Teaching Speaking Skill for EFL Learners

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Abstract: Mastering English speaking skill helps learners communicate and negotiate in work and life more effectively in the era of globalization. Most English learners want to be able to speak English fluently like native speakers. However, learners encounter many difficulties in developing speaking skill although teachers have spent too much effort, and used many new teaching methods. Therefore, the research aims to evaluate the impact of using group work on students' speaking ability, and identify students' attitudes towards the application of group work in EFL classroom. Thanks to the findings of this study, teachers are able to prove the significant benefits of implementing group work to apply in English speaking teaching context widely.

Keywords: EFL learners, English teaching, group work, speaking skill.

1. Introduction

The development of English as the most popular language globally has brought out the high demand of communicative ability in English language in Vietnam. Therefore, how to help student speak English fluently is one of the most important targets in learning and teaching process. According to Chaiyasuk et al. (2013), of all skill, speaking is an important skill, thereby students can show their language ability; effective language use demonstrates language acquisition of students. It is true that, teaching and learning of a foreign language should develop learners' communicative ability. As a matter of fact, English is an obligatory subject of all levels from elementary school to university in Vietnam. Mastering English is a key to a successful life with more job opportunities, higher education and promotion.

Traditionally, many Vietnamese teachers use Grammar-Translation approach which is known as teacher-centered approach in their teaching. In other words, teachers of English usually focus more on delivering grammar structures and new vocabulary, which is quite effective if the learners only do the national tests. However, they are unable to communicate even in daily life conversation. According to Tran (2018), English speaking ability of the majority of university students and graduates is inadequate with the educators' adoptions to help students better their speaking skill. Unfortunately, this is also the unexpected reality at many schools in Vietnam including my workplace - Dong Nai Technology University. Most students are not confident in speaking in spite of spending such

long time learning and practicing English language, so they become timid and afraid of speaking especially in public.

Realizing the existing problem, teachers should apply classroom activities that bring students more opportunities to communicate in the target language not only inside but outside the classroom so that students can build up their speaking ability. From many researches and surveys conducted, learners of English tend to lack speaking ability due to the acquaintance of studying language with the old methods. As a result, there must be a completely different approach to be applied in teaching speaking skill for first year students majoring in English who attempt to achieve better speaking score. After observing the key elements affecting the development of speaking skills such as learners' ability, social background, motivation and interest, it is found that group work technique is a possible solution in this case. Therefore, the topic of implementing group work at Dong Nai Technology University is investigated by examining the following research questions.

- 1) What are the effects of using group work to improve students' speaking ability?
- 2) How does student react to group work activities in the classroom?

2. Literature Review

The Group work technique has been defined in many researches. Burdett and Hastie (2009) state that group work is a classroom activity in Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) that creates a setting for peer-to-peer studying; group work involves students with each other in meaningful interaction for improving oral skills. In addition, group work is considered as a method that motivates learners, develops communication and encourages active learning in EFL classroom (Ibnian, 2012). This active teaching technique has been noticed with the desire to improve students' speaking ability. However, when using group work, teachers need to decide group size carefully. The large number of students in the classroom could lead to ineffective learning of EFL (Alfares, 2017). According to Davis (1993), groups of four or five students can work best. It is true that group members do not have more opportunity of participation and contribution in large groups.

Many studies have been carried out to illustrate the positive

effects of using group work in EFL setting. Hess (2001) presents that the application of group work provides language learners real life situations which are perfect for communicating. Likewise, Phan (2018) claimed that group work activities give learners more chances to speak the target language, help them learn from other members in the group. She found that when applying group work method in language teaching, the most important improvement is students' fluency. It is apparent that students have more practice of speaking new language than working in individuals or whole-class context. Moreover, the use of small group discussion tactic builds up students' oral competence and enhances students' participation. (La'biran, 2017). Clearly, students are able to learn new skills while working in group since each group has members with different skills and abilities especially communication skills.

The majority of students are afraid of making mistakes and losing face when speaking in front of class especially large size class. As a result, those students have been failing in their language learning and acquisition. Hence, in terms of motivation, many students are highly motivated by the application of group work strategy. As stated by Liu (2015) motivation is a factor that contributes to create high degree of students' autonomy. Jiang (2009) reveals that small group work creates a relaxed and non-stressed learning atmosphere. Obviously, students feel less nervous when expressing their ideas using the target language with their group members instead of being watched by teacher or the entire class. In other words, students' talking time is extended significantly during group discussion period. Needless to say, group work technique can establish a more supportive learning environment and increase students' communication competence effectively.

Despite the benefits of group work, some researchers also concern about its disadvantages. Petursdottir (2009) states in his study that it is difficult for some teachers to monitor group work activities. Sometimes, teacher do not know how to analyze and evaluate each student' cooperation, contribution and performance in groups. Clearly, students have various level of understanding, background knowledge and language competence so the jobs distribution of every group mate in completing given tasks is not always equal. Furthermore, some students may feel disappointed as their group does not appreciate their opinions as much as others. As a result, they may involve less in the group and gradually lack motivation and enthusiasm in the learning process. Another drawback of group work is the domination of their peers. In some cases, they can be influenced by their members' suggestions, losing their views, originality and making mistakes (Roskosa & Rupniece, 2016). Thereby, it is crucial for educators to analyze the problems and propose possible measures.

3. Material and Methods

Participants: Forty-two first year English majored students were chosen to take part in the research. These students have been studying English over 10 years so they are proficient enough to understand English questions so that they could understand the questionnaire items and provide proper responses. Since the participants all meet the requirement, the

results of the survey should be considered reliable.

Instruments and Procedure: In order to collect the data, a mixed-method was constructed in this paper including questionnaire and observation. The combination of both quantitative and qualitative data makes the findings more valid and persuasive.

Questionnaire was created in the format of Google form; then it was distributed to the participants via the Internet (Facebook, Gmail) for their best convenience. The researcher gave the participants a fair length of time to fill out the questionnaire. The participants were asked to give their answers with honesty and thoroughness. Google form automatically collected all answers from the participants and notified the researcher.

Class observation was carried out in the beginning, middle and final stage of the innovation to view students' changes in terms of interaction and classroom atmosphere through the lessons with group work. Two colleagues from Faculty of Foreign Languages were invited to observe the experimental class and took note on a given observation form.

Data Analysis:

All quantitative data were inputted accurately into the excel spreadsheet. This software was used to calculate the numbers of response for each question into percentages. The data then was revealed optically in tables, graphs and charts.

With qualitative data, the researcher read the notes from observation form carefully and analyzed the major theme about students' changes and improvement when using the innovation.

4. Results and Discussion

A. Results of the Observation

With new learning technique, students are motivated to work in focus group to exchange and discuss the assigned tasks such as giving presentation, role playing, telling story and playing games. As a result, they can discover new knowledge, express ideas, and promote their creativity. As noted by the observers, the students actively participated in game like activities and had a lot of fun. The class atmosphere was dynamic and lively. Besides collaborative learning environment, the students talked and shared ideas using the target language more.

Changes are showed through class atmosphere and time for students to speak English. The lessons without group work activities make class atmosphere not lively, the time for students to speak English is less than the ones with group work. The following table is what teacher observed through experimental lessons.

Table 1
Differences between lessons with and without group work activities

Differences	Use group work	Not use group work
Students' talking time	80% - 85%	50% - 55%
Supportive learning atmosphere	80% - 90%	40% - 50%

B. Results of the Questionnaire

Participants were asked to appraise whether they enjoy studying with group work in the first question. It can be seen clearly in the below pie chart that the majority of the students

revealed their agreement including 28.6% of strong agreement and 33.3% of agreement. It is true that they were fond of the use of group work when learning English. On the other hand, 23.8% of the students disagreed with this statement and 14.3% of the responses were strong disagreement. These rates show that group work strategy really attracts students in the learning process.

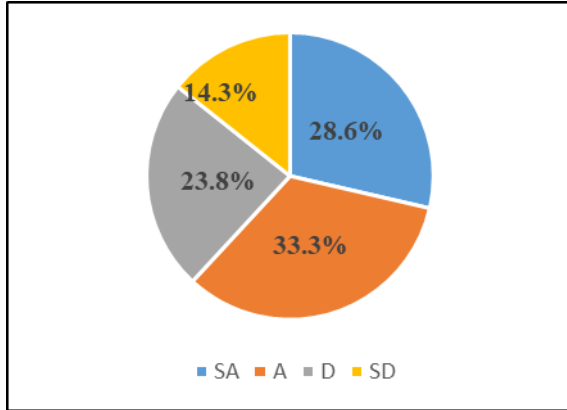


Fig. 1. Students' interest toward group work

Moreover, the respondents showed their opinion about the degree of interaction in the lessons with group work in the next question. Overall, the majority of students agreed that group work increased the interaction between students-teachers and students-students. While percentage of students disagreed and strongly disagreed with the idea was low at 11.9% and 9.5% respectively, relatively high proportions of responses were agreement including 42.9% of students agreed and 35.7% of students strongly agreed. This proved that the trend of teaching and learning through group work had met the learners' needs.

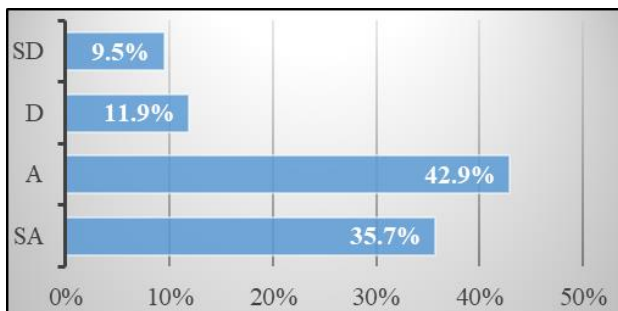


Fig. 2. Students' opinions about the degree of interaction

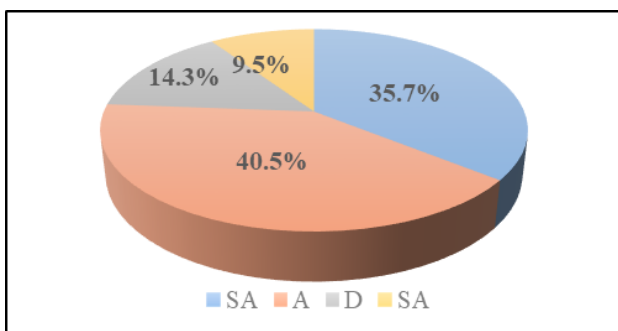


Fig. 3. Student's improvement in communication skill

With new learning technique, 76.2% of the students agreed that they could develop their communication skill while 23.8% of the responses were disagreement. It is true that students need to discuss with their mates and share ideas in teamwork. Gradually, they would form a better habit of using English when talking with teachers and friends during the lessons. The following chart is what teacher identified through the practice of group work.

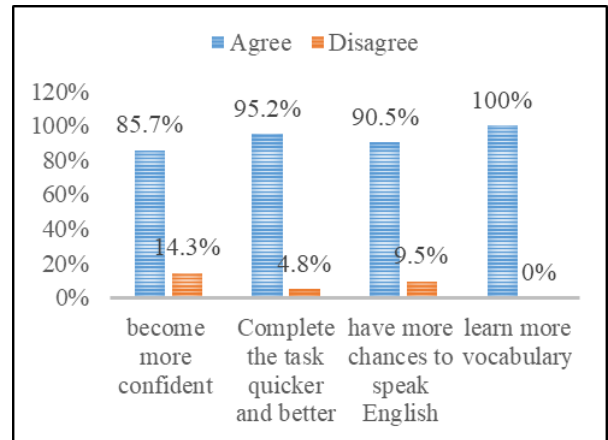


Fig. 4. The benefits of group work

As shown in Fig. 4, students' views about the advantages of group work strategy, the researcher had combined the percentages of into two categories - agree and disagree. In responses to the first benefit whether group work enhances students' confidence or not, 85.7% of the students agreed with the statement while 14.3% of the students disagreed that they become more confident. Regarding to the second benefit, 95.2% of the students were in agreement with the view that they complete the tasks quicker and better, while only a small proposition of responses was disagreement at 4.8%. For the view point of having more speaking opportunities, 90.5% of the students agreed with the view, only 9.5% of the students expressed their disagreement. Surprisingly, in students' answers to the next point whether this technique made contribution to improve students' vocabulary or not, all of the students (100%) agreed that they learned more vocabulary through group discussion.

This innovation evaluates group work in connection with improving the students' speaking performance. Actually, there are many teachers claim that pair work also work best in boosting up learners' speaking proficiency. However, this study shows that the implementation of group work enhance students' speaking ability by increasing students' talking time during the lessons. Apparently, interactions between the good and the bad students will soar and they can support each other in completing the tasks. It is also the aim of every teacher to create supportive learning environment with group work. Undoubtedly, students are given more chances to practice English speaking skill. In addition, the process of learning and developing a deeper understanding of subject happens when students discuss and share ideas with others. Consequently, they are able to remember more new words. Also, it is certain that teamwork

plays an essential part in almost areas of our society today, especially, in academic studies. Group work can help students reduce the learning workload. Students have to deal with so many tasks and assignments in a course. Thus, learning in small groups is one of the best ways to save time and create higher efficiency. This is also a chance to exchange the lesson after school effectively.

5. Conclusion

By implementing teaching and learning in focus group, students can explore, practice and process information, build their own knowledge, competencies and qualities that help them not only intensify speaking performance but also motivation in learning English. However, teachers are required to work harder in planning activities throughout the lessons, and assigning relevant students' work. In order to increase the effectiveness of new techniques in teaching English in particular and other subjects in general, there should be professional group meetings where teachers can discuss to find out the most relevant approaches. It is also an opportunity for colleagues to share experiences, exchange ideas to come up with the best solution to enhance students' oral production.

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