



## INSIGHTS ON BRAZILLIAN EFL CLASSROOM: GROUP WORK

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### ABSTRACT

Group work became a major issue for classroom studies since the development of the Communicative Approach encouraging students to interact. Based on advantages and disadvantages of this approach as pointed by authors like Martine and Walters, this research represents an attempt to discover the view of teachers and students of Centro de Línguas para a Comunidade towards the use of group activities and pair-up tasks, taking into consideration the studies performed by Tsui, Brown, Littlewood and Martine. The results revealed that in general both students and teachers appreciate and consider group work an important feature to be explored inside classroom.

### 0 INTRODUCTION

Communication has been a major issue of studies for a long time. Those studies led to a concept called linguistic competence, which is the capability of articulating speech in order to achieve information exchange and meaning negotiation. For the last decades, with the creation of the Communicative Approach, teachers of English have been seeing the importance of interaction inside classroom. As Brown defined this concept:

“Interaction is the collaborative exchange of thoughts, feelings, or ideas between two or more people resulting in a reciprocal effect on each other. Theories of communicative competence emphasize the importance of interaction as human beings use language in various contexts to ‘negotiate’ meaning, or simply stated, to get one idea out of your head and into the head of another person and vice versa.” (Brown, H. Douglas; 1994 – p. 159) [1]

On the one hand, a considerable number of teachers have problems with stimulating their students for interaction. They complain that their students are way too quiet, and that their responses are nothing more than the classic monosyllabic “yes” and “no”. Indeed, sometimes students have many reasons not to speak a lot in classroom, from having a bad day until pure shyness.

On the other hand, we cannot attribute all the “lack of interaction” problems to the students without analyzing first what the teacher is preparing for his classes. According to Tsui (1995, pg. 7) [4], “(studies) have shown that the language used by the teacher affects the language produced by the learners, the interaction generated and hence the kind of learning that takes place”. Considering the previously said, there is a possibility that the teacher is using “difficult language” or speaking too fast, hence discouraging students to interact. There is also a possibility that the teacher is not being able to assure an interactive atmosphere, for as Brown (1994) [1] stated that “The most important key to creating an interactive language classroom is the initiation of interaction by the teacher”.

Taking Brown’s and Tsui’s point of view, we can say that the teacher is responsible for creating such interactive

atmosphere where his students feel comfortable to practice; that is where some teachers find a problem.

Many teachers like to perform a strategy known as “group work”, which consists in dividing students in groups so they can interact with less pressure from the teacher’s eyes. Sometimes they adopt pair-work (dividing the students in pairs) with small discussion topics, or just oral drills; in other occasions they adopt bigger groups with more complex discussions which involve student’s opinions and articulation of ideas. As Gower, Phillips and Walters (1995, pg. 32) [5] have written: “During pair-work and group work students cannot expect and often do not need constant attention”.

This strategy seems to be very effective, but it seems as well that the number of teachers that know how to apply this feature during their class sessions, or the ones that really believe that it really works effectively, is not so big. However, many researchers and teachers point out many advantages and benefits to take from this kind of activity.

Not only to point out different views of how the “group working” practice could be used in classroom, this paper also aims to getting Brazilian EFL teachers view, together with their own students’, by a quantitative research which will be presented afterwards. This should be important and insightful because this way we can get to more realistic conclusions about the use of group work inside Brazilian classrooms, considering how the Brazilian culture and tradition can cope with this kind of practice.

### 1 REVIEW OF LITERATURE

An interactive atmosphere is not something easy to be achieved during English classrooms. It is interesting to see the students who are still trying to dominate the new language struggle to maintain their speech meaningful and intelligible for their peers; however, according to Brown (1994) [1], the responsibility of motivating the students towards interaction is the teachers’.

Although there are pupils that manage to keep the interaction for long time, as well as those who stop earlier and cannot engage a longer conversation, it is the role of the teacher to provide good opportunities and a cooperative

and social atmosphere where the students feel comfortable to try out their new knowledge Brown (1994) [1].

Reflecting on Brown consideration, language classrooms must be spaces to promote interaction, to favor the sharing opinions, experiences and feelings and to stimulate creativity and discussions beyond the objective grammar teaching. When students interact they help each other to acquire knowledge of the new language. As Brown (1994) [1] said, "Interaction is the collaborative exchange of thoughts, feelings, or ideas between two or more people resulting in a reciprocal effect on each other."

In a group work activities new learners usually have problems in understanding and performing, since they have never had a broad experience with the language. However, mistakes should not be considered negative facts to acquire a new language.

According to Littlewood (1981) [2], students' errors can be considered as a way to reach the target knowledge. This way the error is an attempt to internalize and organize the new information offered by the teacher. Then we can suppose that group interaction creates opportunities for a benefic exploration of students' development background about the new information they have just acquired from the teacher.

Littlewood (1981) [2] divides classroom interaction in two types: the Functional communication, which is the one that prepares students to use the language for specific situations, especially concentrating in achieving mastery in the grammar topic of the lesson; and the second one is the Social communication, which is the one that lets students gradually be able to use proper language depending on the social situation involved the context, making him able to articulate the grammar structures.

Martine (2006) [3] brings pros and cons in the use of pair and work group in classroom activities with non-native language learners. She analysed many Asian classrooms, studying their interaction to explore these features:

As one of the advantages, Martine (2006) [3] cites that Group Work increases students' talking time (STT), giving them more opportunities to share information. According to Tsui (1995) [4] students don't have much time to talk, thus this feature could prove itself a valuable strategy to increase interaction between students.

Groupwork also proposes a more authentic and realistic simulation of conversation, instigating students to use more and better their linguistic skills, even in a simulation, as Martine states:

"This type of SGW involves the conversational techniques of agreeing, disagreeing, negotiation of meaning and clarification. These are all important strategies that are often used in English conversations." (Martine. 2001, pg.1) [3]

Group work creates a secure and positive classroom atmosphere (taking risk and mistakes were considered part of new language acquisition) favoring funny and enthusiastic moments.

As Disadvantages Martine (2006) [3] considered that the Interactive Activities could not help students to pass university entrance examination since the writing and reading skills usually are more important for this kind of test. Other disadvantage is that students sometimes feel that teacher loses control of the class.

Even though Martine (2006) [3] researches and analyses those features only on Asian classrooms, they can be perfectly adapted to Eastern English classrooms as well.

As well as Martine (2006) [3], Tsui (1995) [4] has done much research about Asian interaction moments, however she tends to speak more about classroom oral communication than about Asian interactivity; so Tsui's research is as important as Martine's, however in a different perspective.

Two great contributors to the development of the questionnaire used in this research were Tsui, with her research about classroom oral communication, and Gower, Phillips and Walters (1995) [5], which dedicated many chapters and subchapters throughout their book of 1995 to groupwork inside classroom. Their suggestions about how to instigate students towards cooperation, and their definitions about the importance of teacher talking time and student talking time created points of questioning, which allowed the better development of the questions proposed.

## 2 METHODOLOGY

This quantitative research used two different questionnaires, being one of them projected for teachers to answer and the other one designed for students to answer. In the teachers' questionnaire there were seven questions, whereas in the students' questionnaire there were six. There were some questions that were asked both for students and teachers. The teachers' questionnaire can be seen in Annex 1, while the students' questionnaire can be seen in Annex 2.

All the interviews were made by inquiring students and teachers from Centro de Línguas para a Comunidade, a language institute located inside Universidade Federal do Espírito Santo and officialized in 1997 as an extension project for the Language Department. It has more than 7000 students that study not only English, but many other languages like German or French.

As for the interview, twenty teachers were interviewed. All of them were teachers of various levels of English classrooms; there were twenty interviewed students as well, ten from the level BASIC 4 and ten from the level ADVANCED 2. All those teachers and students belonged to the same institution – the Centro de Línguas para a Comunidade, located at and constituted by Universidade Federal do Espírito Santo.

The data acquired from those interviews were analyzed, specifically looking for points of similarity between what could be inferred from Brown (1994) [1], Martine (2006) [3] and Tsui (1995) [4] and what could be discovered through the interviews.

## 3 DATA ANALYSIS

For this analysis the questions presented in the teacher's and student's questionnaires were put together in order to have a better view of what both sides think about and consider important concerning the use of group work activities in class.

All the teachers who answered the questionnaire reported to appreciate applying group work in their classes and defend it as an important and useful activity whereas students who answered the questionnaire showed 80% of

appreciation to group work while 20% declared not to like this kind of activity. Being 20% a considerable number of students in class, teachers have to be sensible to supply the needs of interactive activities without neglecting students who do not feel comfortable during this kind of exercise.

It is important to point out that teachers' role during group work activities is to encourage and stimulate, acting as a mediator which helps students in sharing their talking time so that the shyest ones are not jeopardized by more spontaneous and confident ones.

50% per cent of the teachers prefer pair work while the other half prefers interaction in small groups. Pair-work benefits students with more comfort and time to practice if compared to whole group or even small groups activities. During this kind of interaction students tend to feel less anxious and shy to express their opinions, also, stronger and more talkative students may help their weaker peers with their difficulties and reinforce their strengths.

Students' responses show bigger preference for mini groups, 40%, with 20% reporting preference for small groups, 20% for interaction as a whole group and 20% who would rather not to Interact with other students.

Small groups have a relevant advantage in students' preference; during this kind of interaction the weaker or shyer student take advantage of the most talkative ones and tend to be quiet, also, whenever the teacher gets close to check out the group production his/her attention will be on the group as whole instead of a certain member.

In any of the formats the use of group work activities increases the chances that each student has to practice the language and reduces the amount of Teacher Talking Time, thus, the use of interactive activities is an important way of optimizing language production in class.

The results point out that most of the teachers (80%) use group work activities in a high frequency basis and this data is confirmed by the fact that students are able to identify these moments in exactly the same percentage. The reduced amount of teachers who use group work activities in a less frequent basis reported that although the effort towards giving students' some peer practice there are times when there is a struggle about how and when to apply it in class.

Fourty per cent of the teachers dedicate from 6 to 12 minutes to group work interaction, 30% use 13 to 20 minutes and 20% reports a variation according to each class.

Only 10% of the teachers reported to separate up to five minutes, out of 60, to group work interaction and it points out a controversial data, although most of the teachers dedicate a fair amount of time and some teachers almost don't use it, 100% of the students reported to be satisfied with the time which is separate for group work interaction in their classes. This result leads to different directions for example about the existence of an ideal amount of time for group work activities, about students will for interaction versus the teacher will/ability to manage this kind of activity, about the students' maturity to judge what enough time for interactive activity is, and many other variables which were not investigated in this research.

Teachers reported that 50% of their students show excitement when a group work activity is started in class, while 40% react normally and 10% seem to be bored.

Students' answers indicate the same results except for the fact that the 10% of boredom reported by the teachers is reported as dislike by the students.

The number of 90% of students who react with excitement or normally to group work activities reinforce that students recognize this moment as important for their development and also that they dislike being passive in "by the book" classes, yet this number show that group work being used in a regular basis makes it more comfortable and profitable for the whole class, even the ones who do not like group work.

When asked about their students' performance during group work activities teachers 50% said that students get really involved, with 30% tending to be distracted and 20% reported as other options.

The 20% of other options reported is related to the answers "all of the above" and "depends on the group" which shows that students' response to group work will vary based on different variables.

Only 20% of the teachers interviewed reported some kind of loss of control during group work activity. Although group work may be very profitable for students it is yet seen as risk to be taken, especially when dealing with teenager groups.

If the teacher promotes interaction among without losing the theme of discussion and they are able to continue that for a short time sharing ideas the interaction will be considered successful, otherwise the whole class plan may be lost.

Results show that 80% of the students see group work activities as a tool to practice natural conversation with 20% who believe these activities are meant to estimate interaction.

This data show that students have enough maturity to see that they are not under evaluation all the time or that the teacher has something else to do while they practice by themselves. This result also shows that students are aware of the social importance of language in their lives, in the sense that being able to share ideas, agree or disagree with different topics and other real life situations are seen as a necessary competence which will be better performed if practiced in the controlled environment of a classroom.

The reasons why most teachers like group work in their classrooms are related to promoting interaction and also giving students the chance to help each other. It is important to point out that students feel less anxious, as Brown (1994) [1] discussed with his ideas of shared responsibilities and exposition and also Littlewood's (1981) [2] statement that students tend to share the information which is more important for their lives.

When asked about the reasons why they appreciate group work most of the students said that it is a chance to learn from each other, to have some interaction and also because it is funny. The relationship among students is beneficial because this way they share their ideas, background knowledge and experiences.

Considering that there are different levels of the four abilities in each class one student's ability in Listening for example may help another student who is not well developed in this area to build up his confidence during practice, also, there are students who feel uncomfortable about asking the teacher about a doubt or to repeat an instruction who will certainly benefit from group work whenever it is proposed in class.

#### 4 CONCLUSION

One of the main objectives of this project was to find out about the way teachers see and apply group work activities in class, and although most of the expectations created about the initial questions have been confirmed the Student's Questionnaire brought up a broader point of view concerning this subject.

Group work activities in all of its instances (Pair-work, group work, etc...) are considered fundamental tools to help students strengthen up their communicative proficiency. However, there are some relevant implications involving both teachers' attitude and students' reaction that may influence the students' development in either positive or negative way according to how teachers use group work interaction in their classes.

The use of a questionnaire provided some very interesting data about the point of view from both students and teachers. It was interesting to see how the use of group work in class is appreciated by both sides and also that students are able to understand how important it is for them to have this kind of activity in class.

However, new questions came up as the questionnaire was analyzed, these questions are related to the existence of an ideal amount of time to be dedicated to group work interaction and how to measure the quality instead of the quantity of this time, but due to the extension and the focus of this present project these questions had to be left for further research.

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