



## Peculiarities of Group-Work Activities in the Classroom

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### Abstract

*Current paper deals with the observation of group-work activities in the English classroom. Actually the teacher must recognize learners beliefs, preferences, hobbies or other identities for implementing them in class. Besides, before playing group-work activity in the classroom, it is necessary to explain its rules to the learners.*

*In the frame of this article we specify and analyze different types of group activities: Information gap, brainstorming, prism, jigsaw activities, drama, role-play, Interviews, projects, problem solving and decision making with their peculiarities and advantages. Besides, group work activities embrace games that are subdivided into Linguistic games (Focus is on language accuracy) and Communicative games (Focus is on meaningful exchange of information, ideas, and messages).*

*Thus, purposeful Implementation of group-work activities generates interaction in the language classroom, enhancing the development of the learners' language communicative competence.*

**Key words:** pair/group work, collaboration, oral discourse, cooperation, learner autonomy, competition, relaxation, motivation.

Group work covers a range of techniques through which students get engaged in a task that involves collaboration, self-initiation and language use. As P. Ur states, pair work is also a group work, but it is easier, because students are often sitting in pairs anyway and simply turn towards each other. Pair work is more appropriate for the shorter collaborative tasks. Group work is more difficult to organize, because it usually involves moving students, and sometimes their chairs and tables [4; p.233]. Besides group work is more difficult to control with an undisciplined class. In teaching practice we usually differentiate small and large groups, based on the number of students. Large groupings give students more opportunities to speak. Group work must be carefully planned, well structured and monitored. There are some practical tips that we, as a teacher must take into consideration before implementing in class, they are:

### Revising and Evaluating Classroom Language

One of the first considerations related to organizing a group work in class is being ascertain that our students have an appropriate command of language knowledge through which they can carry out their group task. There are group works that are linguistically quite simple, and particularly for lower proficiency level learners. But at higher levels we often try to direct our students to discuss some particular points or questions, with no further explanation, assuming that our students know exactly what we mean by the words.

In order to make sure that a group task is accurately understood by students, not only are clear directions important, but students must be able to carry out the discourse necessary to accomplish the task. This means that prior to the task, students have performed the various bits and pieces of classroom language that the task presupposes.

### Selecting Appropriate Group Techniques

There are, in fact some important differences between **pair work** and group work. Pair work is more appropriate than group work for tasks that are short, linguistically simple. Appropriate pair activities include:

- Practicing dialogues with a partner
- Simple question-and-answer exercises
- Performing certain meaningful substitution "drills"
- Quick (one minute or less) brainstorming activities
- Checking written work with each other.

Pair work provides opportunity to engage students in interactive (or quasi-interactive) communication. it is also appropriate for many group work tasks. The first step in promoting successful group work is to



select a task appropriate to students' interests, hobbies, their language communicative skills. Below we introduce group tasks with typical characteristics:

### **Games**

Games are a vital part of English teaching classes. Embracing rules and elements of fun, they must be an integral component of the language syllabus, as a technique with clear goals, objectives, tasks and expected outcomes. Games are a good way of practising language. They motivate learners, promote classroom interaction, improve learners' language acquisition and their communicative skills. Games can be used at all stages of the language instruction from controlled to free practice. Games can also serve as a diagnostic tool for teachers to note and specify the areas of difficulty and take appropriate constructive actions. Sometimes students are lazy and not motivated to do their tasks. So for this account games lead the learners for participation in different activities. They get a chance to practise or use the new language items (vocabulary, grammar structures and rules, phonetic items) they have just learnt eagerly and willingly instead of forcing them to do as a task. The most particular effective point is that learners play and learn at the same time. Games motivate learners, encouraging their teamwork solidarity. So while considering games as a technique we come across with the following factors, such as **rules, competition, relaxation, and learning**.

Generally, in contemporary foreign language teaching methodology games are divided into two main types:

**Linguistic games** - Focus is on language accuracy (vocabulary/grammar/spelling/phonology games).

**Communicative games** - Focus is on meaningful exchange of information, ideas, and messages.

### **Role play**

Role-play can be described with at least four features:

- **closeness**
- **situation**
- **realism**
- **personality**[1; p. 117-118]

Role-play can be:

- **controlled** (the participants are responsible for the language they use),
- **semi-controlled** (participants are partly expected to use the prescribed language),
- **free** (participants are responsible for the message not for the prescribed language),
- **small-scale** (lasting for a lesson or less)
- **large-scale** (lasting for more than a lesson or perhaps for the whole term).

Role play requires learners to project themselves into an imaginary situation where they may play themselves or where they may be required to play a character role. In some instances this is prescribed in detail and at other times learners are free to create the role, which inevitably leads to greater involvement in the activity [3; p. 158]. A situation or scenario may be realistic or unrealistic for learners, even it may appeal to the learners' sense of fantasy. Role play provides learners with opportunities to practise correct and appropriate use of a wide range of language functions, notions and structures in a variety of contexts. For example, a group role play might involve a discussion of a political/ecological issue, with each person assigned to represent a particular political/ ecological point of view.

### **Simulation**

Learners who are familiar with role play may be introduced to simulation which is a more complex activity, usually requiring greater preparation and organization and more time to carry out. Simulation can take the form of role-play and problem solving. Role-plays can be based on roles and scenarios [2; p. 352].

Simulations may involve learners in imaginative activities, for example how to survive on a desert island in the face of various dangers and difficulties, or, more realistically, in accomplishing a task such as preparing the front page of a newspaper, a publicity campaign, or a radio/TV programme. Participants may also be placed in a situation of conflict where teams take on roles to defend or oppose a proposal before a decision is taken, e.g. whether or not to build a nuclear power plant, to



abolish beauty contests, and so on. Simulations have rules which constrain participants, requiring them to act in a realistic manner in keeping with their roles [3; p. 158-159]. While they are often less flexible than role play activities and less convenient because they usually require a lot of time.

Simulations usually involve a more complex structure and often larger groups (of 6 to 20) where the entire group is working through an imaginary situation as a social unit, the object of which is to solve some specific problem.

### **Drama**

Drama is a more formalized form of role play or simulation, with a preplanned story line and script. Sometimes small groups may prepare their own short dramatization of some event, writing the script and rehearsing the scene as a group. Actually dramatic performances have positive effects on language learning, but they are time consuming and the teachers must take into account this factor before involving them in the school curriculum.

### **Projects**

Particularly for intermediate learners projects can be rewarding. Projects are long-term, problem-focused and meaningful activities that bring together learners with their ideas and initiatives.

Many-year-professional experience has shown that projects are manageable and educationally effective. They are especially good teaching tools because they motivate students to learn about and use a wide variety of literacy and thinking skills-both critical and creative. For example, publishing a newspaper gives students opportunities to plan, write, reflect on, revise articles. It provides a way in which the students can share their work with others. Projects encourage students to become self-directed thinkers and performers.

### **Interviews**

A popular activity for pair work, but also appropriate for group work, interviews are useful at all levels of proficiency. At the lower levels, interviews can be very structured, both in terms of the information that is sought and the grammatical difficulty and variety. The goal of an interview could at this level be limited to using requesting functions, learning vocabulary for expressing personal data, producing questions, etc.

Students might ask each other questions like



What's your name?  
Where do you live?  
What country (city) are you from?  
What is your favourite film/country?  
What is your hobby and learn to give appropriate responses.

At the higher levels, interviews can embrace more complex facts, opinions, ideas, and feelings, e.g.

Tell me about yourself.  
How would you describe yourself?  
What makes you unique?  
What are your greatest strengths?  
What are your greatest weaknesses?  
What are your goals for the future?  
Can you tell me about a difficult work situation and how you overcame it?  
How do you handle stress?  
What makes you uncomfortable?  
Are you a morning person?  
Are you more of a leader or a follower? [5].

So the teachers' task is to identify learners language communicative skills, their intellect, social, psychological peculiarities before elaborating topics or questions for class interviews.

### **Brainstorming**

Brainstorming is a technique the purpose of which is to initiate/activate learners thinking process.



**Brainstorming** is a large or small group activity that encourages students to focus on a topic and contribute to the free flow of ideas. The teacher may begin a brainstorming session by posing a question or a problem, or by introducing a topic. Students then express possible answers, relevant words and ideas. Why to use brainstorming in the classroom?



- Learners use their prior knowledge.
- All students get a chance to express their ideas.
- It eliminates fear of failures.
- Learners show respect for each other.
- They try something without fear.
- Learners introduce individuality and creativity.
- It eliminates the fear of risk-taking [6].

### Information gap

Information-gap activities include a tremendous variety of techniques in which the objective is to convey or to request information. The two focal characteristics of information-gap techniques are

- their primary attention to information and not to language forms and
- the necessity of communicative interaction in order to reach the objective.

The information that students must seek can range from very simple to complex. At the beginning level, for example, each member of a small group could be given the objective of finding out from the others their birthday, address, favorite food, etc., and filling in a little chart with the information. In intermediate classes teachers could ask groups to collectively pool information about different occupations: necessary qualifications, how long it takes to prepare for an occupation, how much the preparation costs, what typical job conditions are, what salary levels are, etc. In advanced classes, a small-group discussion on determining an author's message, among many other possibilities, would be an information-gap technique.

### Jigsaw activities

Jigsaw techniques are a special variety of information gap in which each member of a group is given some specific information and the goal is to pool all information to achieve some objective. Imagine four members of a group each with an application form, and on each form different information is provided. As students ask each other questions (without showing anyone their own application form), they eventually complete all the information on the form. Or the teacher might provide maps to students in small groups, each student receiving different sets of information (where the bank is, where the park is, etc.). The goal for beginners might be simply to locate everything correctly, and for intermediate learners to give directions on how to get from one place on the map to another, requiring a collaborative exchange of information in order to provide complete directions.

### Problem solving and decision making

Problem-solving group techniques focus on the group's solution of a specified problem. They might or might not involve jigsaw characteristics, and the problem itself might be

- **relatively simple**, for example: giving directions on a map
- **moderately complex**, for example: working out an itinerary from train, plane, and bus schedules
- **quite complex**, for example: solving a mystery in a "crime story" or dealing with a political or moral dilemma.

Once again, problem-solving techniques direct students' attention on meaningful cognitive challenges and not so much on grammatical or phonological forms.

**Decision-making** techniques are simply one kind of problem solving where the ultimate goal is for students to make a decision. For example, a debate on environmental cataclysms is actually decision-making. As learners' main task is to provide solution to the problem.

### Opinion exchange

Opinions are difficult for students to deal with at the beginning levels of proficiency, but by the intermediate level, certain techniques can effectively include the exchange of various opinions. Many





of the above techniques can easily incorporate beliefs and feelings. Sometimes opinions are appropriate; sometimes they are not, especially when the objective of a task is to deal more with "facts."

Students can get involved in the content-centered situations or context. They can discuss issues that are authentic, for example:

- Women's rights
- Factors in choosing a marriage partner
- Cultural taboos
- Political/religious orientation
- Role of computer games on the child's development
- Environmental issues (air/water/atmosphere pollution)
- War and peace.

One warning: While elaborating or selecting topics for discussion, the teacher must recognize their learners beliefs, preferences, or other identities. Otherwise they could hardly dissolve chaos in the classroom with subsequent negative effects.

### **Planning Group Work**

Possibly the most common reason for the breakdown of group work is an inadequate introduction and lead-in to the task itself. Once we have selected an appropriate type of activity, our planning phase should include the following seven "rules" for implementing a group technique.

- **Introduce the technique.** The introduction may simply be a brief explanation. For example, "Now, in groups of four, you're each going to get different transportation schedules (airport limo, airplane, train, and bus), and your job is to figure out, as a group, which combination of transportation services will take the least amount of time."
- **Justify the use of small groups for the technique.** If you think your students have any doubts about the significance of the upcoming task, then tell them explicitly why the small group is important for accomplishing the task. Remind them that they will get an opportunity to practise certain language forms or functions, and that if they are reluctant to speak up in front of the whole class, now is their chance to do so in the security of a small group.
- **Model the techniques and give explicit detailed instructions.** In simple techniques modeling may not be necessary. But for a new and potentially complex task, it never hurts to be too explicit in making sure students know what they are supposed to do.
- **Divide the class into groups.** This element is not as easy as it sounds. In some cases you can simply number off (e.g., 1,2,3,4,...) and specify which area of the room to occupy. But to ensure participation or control you may want to construct groups taking into consideration the following:
  - proficiency levels
  - age or gender differences
  - cultural or subcultural group
  - personality types
  - cognitive style preferences
  - cognitive/developmental stages (for children)
  - interests
- **Check** if the learners have comprehended their assignments.
- **Set the task in motion.** This part should now be a simple matter of saying something like, "Okay, get into your groups and start with your task."

### **Advantages of the group-work**

- It involves students working collaboratively on a set of tasks or activities in or out of the classroom. It is a pleasure to cooperate with others to produce a joint result, and students enjoy the sense of team building and team solidarity.
- Group work increases the opportunities for all learners to speak the target language. They practise their speech fluency and learn from each other.
- The teacher is free to monitor the individual learners and give them constructive feedback.



- Group work fosters learner autonomy. More students can contribute ideas to a group discussion task. Actually they are not directly controlled by the teacher.
- There are more participants if the activity is a game. Groups can work as teams in a competition. Students get up and move providing welcome break from the routine of sitting in the same place all the time.

### **Reservations**

- Both teachers and learners may encounter reservations while doing group-work. As for the teachers they may have some fear about losing control with groups in class. Students can make a lot of noise or they might use the L1 too much.
- As for the students - some learners neglect group activities and they prefer teacher led traditional classes. They don't enjoy collaboration or cooperation in class. They appreciate individual learning style.

So here the teachers task is not easy. They must understand that if the learners are engaged in interaction, the noise in class is not a necessarily bad thing, particularly if they perform the task effectively. Or the teacher can allow the use of the L1, if the learners face some technical restrictions, e.g. time limit or understanding this or that issue, related to the task completion [2; p.133]. Here the most important factor is the correct design of the task with its goal, structure and outcome. [4; p. 234]

So to conclude with: Purposeful Implementation of group-work activities generates interaction in class, fostering the development of learners' language skills and their diverse competences- both communicative and intellectual.

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