Advantages and disadvantages of pair work and group work

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Pair work and group work give the students far more chances to speak English in the classroom. Students participate in the lesson much more actively because they are involved in talking to their friends exchanging opinions, practising new structures more than listening to their teacher talking. This is important in our Polish schools when English lessons usually take place three times a week, teachers have to practise, develop all the language skills and it happens that there is no time left for speaking. So if a teacher has ten minutes left during the lesson it is better to divide the class into groups and pairs and to give the learners opportunity to really use the language to communicate with each other.

According to Michael Long and his colleagues who investigated differences in the quantity and quality of student language in group work versus teacher centred activities the language produced by students working in groups is more varied and greater in quantity. Learners take the initiative to express themselves, they are more spontaneous. Asking questions and responding they use more language functions. (Lightbown and Spada, 1993:85)

By dividing the class into groups students get more opportunities to talk than in full class organization and each student can say something. Penny Ur recommends that teachers working with large classes should divide them into five groups which is the most effective organization for practising speaking. (Ur, 1996:232)

It is advisable for teachers to spend at least one lesson a month devoted only to speaking. If the topics are adequate to the learners' interests and level such a lesson can be really effective and give a lot of satisfaction both to the learner and the teacher. We should always remember how important the ability to communicate is and provide enough communicative practice while working with the whole class. That is why oral practice in small groups and pairs is essential.

Working in a group children are more engaged not only intellectually but emotionally as well. They have to think, contribute to the group, evaluate what other members of the group say, share information, ask friends for clarification, and prepare a presentation together. "Group work gives learners exposure to a range of language items and language functions."(Krall, 1989-1993:161) Students use and experiment with the language items they already know in order to develop fluency; they also use some items pretaught by the teacher or contributed by the members of the group to express themselves more fully and improve the quality of their performance. Preparing the presentation they learn the new items, process them and make them more personal. They also have to use different strategies to compensate for the items they do not know.

In the long run group work develops learners' independence. At first preparing a group or a pair presentation may be time consuming and requires more effort from the student. However, using this technique regularly students become more efficient and skilled at practising the language. They become more confident, their motivation also increases and they can manage without regular teacher's supervision. Students learn how to learn and gradually take responsibility for their own learning.

Besides practising and consolidating the language group work help to integrate the class. Learners learn how to cooperate with one another, make compromise, negotiate, and respect individuals with different abilities and views which is important for the class atmosphere and relationship with the teacher. Instead of sitting alone trying to understand something difficult they can help each other. If a person in a pair or a group is not able to solve a problem s/he can always rely on his/ her friends who will help him/her because "there is a greater chance that at least one member of the group will be able to solve a problem when it arises."(Harmer, 1991:245) In such a class the teacher is no longer a supervisor but becomes a resource centre and advisor for the students. "Most people learn a foreign language better with others than on their own."(Norman, 1986:11)

Introducing pair work and group work teacher brings some variety into the classroom. And it enables him to individualise work by preparing different tasks taking into account students' abilities and potentials. It is advantageous to use group work with mixed ability classes; when both able and less able students may feel a sense of achievement while completing a task. It is more demanding and time consuming for the teacher because s/he must decide about the level of the students and prepare appropriate tasks yet it gives a lot of satisfaction and motivates the students.

Working in pairs and groups is less stressful and more effective for students, especially introverts who needn't perform in the front of the whole class. They feel more confident working with the friend they like and are more likely to accept his/her correction or criticism. There are always more and less gifted pupils in the process of language learning and these methods prevent them from not being laughed at by the whole class if they say something wrong. "It is generally easier to show that you do not know, or do not understand something, in a smaller group than in a large one."(Norman, Levihn and Hedenquist, 1986:8)

Brumfit says that pair work and group work are the most effective techniques of classroom organization which combine aspects of communication learning and natural interaction in a stress free environment. (Brumfit, 1984:78)

Some teachers are reluctant to introduce pair work and group work being afraid of noise or discipline problems which might occur particularly with children. Indeed students make noise while working on the task; they discuss things, check words, and communicate with one another. However, this is so- called "positive noise" and it does not disturb the students. They are concentrated on the task and they do not hear it. If an activity goes on for too long students, especially the poor ones make noise because they become bored, they want to get the teacher's attention and they may become disruptive. Such noise may become disruptive for the whole activity and class behaviour because misbehaviour is contagious. To avoid a danger of this happening the teacher should plan his/her activity very carefully. Assuming that the learners are familiar with the code of conduct discussed at the beginning of the school year the teacher should give them clear instructions about what to do, when to start and when to stop. The task should be clearly defined and not go for too long. At first students may be confused but once a routine has been set up they should know what is expected from them. This should prevent excessive noise and prevent the class from getting out of control.

Another disadvantage of pair work and group work is the use of the mother tongue. When students get excited working in pairs or groups they sometimes use their mother tongue to express something they are not able to express in a foreign language. Such a situation is normal because they want to communicate. It is teacher's responsibility to plan activities at the level of the students and to encourage them to use the little of the language they know as best as they can because speaking their own language during an oral activity is a waste of time. However, we should not be bothered too much if students use their mother tongue while doing a reading comprehension task or vocabulary exercises because the outcome of their discussion will be presented in English. It may also be necessary to ask students to translate instructions into mother tongue to check if they understand what we want them to do because giving instructions of a complicated activity may be a waste of time. To avoid the use of mother tongue during the lesson the teacher can discuss this problem with the students who should understand that during oral activities the use of the mother tongue is a real problem. During the activity the teacher should encourage the students to use English by going round the classroom helping and prompting students who do not know how to express some ideas.

Simon Haines claims that "being forced to speak a second language to someone who shares your first language is artificial."(Haines, 1995:57) However, if the teacher sets certain standards, addresses the pupils in English only and insists on them using the language it may become quite natural.

Some teachers neglect group work and pair work saying that students make mistakes trying to express their own ideas. Indeed incorrectness is a problem yet in real life it is communicative fluency that matters not accuracy so we should not be concerned too much with accuracy if we want to practise oral skills. But if teachers aim at accuracy they are obliged to try to prevent mistakes as much as possible

giving students a clear model and enough practice before setting students into groups. Teachers should realize that the students' utterances consist of correct language too. Another positive aspect of this problem is the fact that learners correct one another.

When learners work in pairs or groups it is impossible for the teacher to listen and correct all the mistakes they make and this is not the purpose of the activity. However, s/he can reduce the number of mistakes before the students start working by demonstrating the activity to the class first and by asking pairs or groups to perform in front of the class afterwards and discussing what they said and pointing out the most common mistakes.(Doff, 1988:141)

Another way of reducing mistakes is to appoint a very good student to correct the mistakes of his friends. Such a student is responsible for checking the correctness of others' utterances when the teacher helps another group.

It may be a problem to put students into groups. There is the danger that if the teacher divides the class into mixed ability groups the best students in the group will have to do the task while the weakest ones switch off and become disruptive. To overcome this problem the teacher may put students into groups according to their abilities and each group is given a task right for their level of difficulty. Then the teacher may monitor the whole class, devote more time to the students who need his/her assistance or even work with individual students.

After having taken into consideration all the pros and cons of both pair work and group work it is advisable to use these techniques during English language lessons.

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