

The Significance of Group Work in a FAL Classroom: Language Learning as a Social Practice in Two High Schools in Eastern Cape

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ABSTRACT The national curriculum statement strongly embraces the idea of group. It stipulates that the culture of communication amongst learners must be promoted and the teacher must cooperate with the learners. In line with Archer's *Being Human*, it can be viewed that group work can pay off at individuals and societal levels. This paper therefore strives for the betterment of teaching and learning. Group work seems to replace the traditional way of teaching with the teacher at the helm. It can as such create powerful learning experiences for learners which range from understanding the content to developing problem solving capabilities, communicative skills and team building. It is also a teaching strategy whose lessons go far beyond the classroom. Methodologically, the study used interviews and focus group. The paper makes use of Critical realism as its analytical framework where the themes for analysis are generated by the data.

INTRODUCTION

Historically, South African education was divided on the basis of skin colour during the apartheid regime (Lubbe 1969). This led to an obnoxious situation especially in rural schools where learners were given poor education with fewer resources. In this way, separate education budgets led to a situation where rural learners were less competent and proficient in the language of teaching and learning. This had impacted negatively on the education of the post-apartheid system because learners particularly in rural schools were still less competent. On the other hand, the education system that was offered during that regime was teacher centred (Freire 1972). The learners were playing a passive role in the teaching and learning process. This means teachers were the only source of information while the learners were adjudged as empty vessels (Freire 1972). In view of such oppression, Lubbe (1969) states that the preaching or narrating method was the only effective and available method. Furthermore, the transition stage on the curriculum that took place in the education system left teachers behind. The old curriculum was content based and did not value or promote group work. However the new curriculum emphasizes the use of group work (Department of Education 2010).

Based on the background above, it is evident that a problem exists in our schools. In classrooms, one would find that learners are seated in groups but they are not given the tasks that might require them to work as groups. Thus, the types of groups one might find in classrooms nowadays are simply there to fulfil the requirements of CAPS (2012) but not for the actual practice. This is meant to suggest that teachers lack an understanding of group work.

Aims and Objectives

The paper aims to:

- ♦ Explore the different ways in which group work can be used to improve learners' competency/proficiency in a target language as well as the role of a teacher and the learners.
- ♦ Investigate whether group interaction can improve learner's content knowledge in a given language.
- ♦ Find out if group work can promote a culture of communication in a second language in and out of the classrooms.

Literature Review

Theoretically, this paper is premised within the Critical Realism theory. There is a split be-

tween individualism and collectivism by seeing society relationally and as emergent (Archer 1998). A connected split, upon which the debate about structure and agency is joined, one of which rejects causality, reasons could be causes on a critical realist conception of causality. The question that Critical Realism poses here is whether society and human phenomena generally can be studied in the same way as nature. In other words, it is based on a distinctive conception of the uniqueness of the social realm that is pre-interpreted, conceptualized or linguistic in character. Based on Critical Realism, the approach for this paper is qualitative in nature.

Critical Realism sets out to explain the contradictions in thought and the crises of socio-economic life in terms of the particularly contradictory essential relations generating them; as historical, because it was both rooted in, and is (conditionally) an agent of the changes in the very relationships and circumstances it describes; as “critical”. This is because it demonstrates the historical conditions of validity and limits of adequacy of the categories, doctrines and practices that it explains. It is also seen as systematic because it sought to trace the various historical tendencies and contradictions of “capitalism back to certain existentially constitutive features” of its mode of production (Archer 1998). The most important of these are the contradictions between the use-value and value of the commodity, and between the concrete useful and abstract social aspects of the labour it embodies. During knowledge creation process in a group, (Kershner 2012) socio-cultural and historical theory posits that contexts are important for individuals as such contexts give the basis for one to interpret information to create meanings. This appears seeks to be a little more concrete than the abstract nature of traditional grammar. Foncha (2013) agrees with Vygotsky (1978)- emphasising that the most significant hurdle to effective Knowledge Management is organisational culture. Thus, one can best be understood within one’s society and which is a motivation for the introduction of group work in teaching and learning.

As far as the review of literature is concerned, Krashen (1982) defines ‘learning’ as obtaining knowledge from a formal learning environment. Learners can obtain this information from the teacher or from peers as they discuss in groups. This is because some learners learn better from

their classmates than from the teacher. On the other hand, Long (1982) argues that acquisition is a subconscious process, whereby acquirers are not aware that they are acquiring knowledge. This could refer to unconscious acquisition of knowledge that occurs through interaction and participation in a team work. For instance, learners’ second language gets improved as they discuss with their peers. They might not be discussing the rules of the language but their language improves unconsciously.

In view of this, second language refers to any language other than the home language (Marilyn 2003). According to Bahar (2010: 463), group discussion refers to a particular form of interaction where members join together to address a question of common concern. Group discussions are very much effective in a learning environment particularly in a language classroom as it merges the formal and informal learning. This type of learning helps in creating a concrete understanding of the content and also caters for all the communication skills (speaking, listening, writing and reading) of a language classroom.

In light of the group discussions, group work is when three or more people work together applying their minds in an attempt to achieve a common goal (Galton 2009). Frykedal and Chiriac (2012) from a similar perspective argue that a group should consist of 3 to 6 members. Group discussions put learners in an advantageous position because it promotes the active participation whereby each and every learner takes part in problem solving (Frykedal and Chiriac 2012). Moreover, group discussion humanises the learning environment whereby some learners can feel free to contribute towards problem solving. For example, some learners are afraid to participate in a larger group which is the classroom but would feel freer in a smaller group of friends. However, some might not contribute when they have to work in smaller groups of friends. It is needful to emphasize that it also depends on whom they are working with. According to Elliott and Reynolds (2012), some learners prefer forming groups on their own so that they select those they can feel comfortable with when working together. Another reason behind their preference for forming groups on their own may be because they want people who are as committed.

According to Foncha (2013), learners learn from each other's ideas and experiences. In this way, if the learners are required to solve or discuss a particular problem, they are in a position to produce a perfect solution because they are sharing ideas. And it might happen that one of the learners may have encountered that problem and as such, that member of the group can ignite the minds of the other members. Frykedal and Chiriac (2012) argue that some learners understand easily if something is explained by their peers. According to Foncha (2013), group work enhances or improves the learners understanding since they imbibe knowledge from each other. Consequently, group discussion is learner-centred; this means the learners are the active participants in the learning environment. The teacher is anticipated to expose learners to knowledge and then facilitate them to get good results (Foncha 2013). Thus, learners construct knowledge through interpersonal interactions among peers. Learners' language can improve if the discussion is conducted properly in the targeted language. In this way the learners grow cognitively. This means that learners are not empty vessels as they have a latent knowledge that needs to be activated by the teacher (Freire 1973).

In overcrowded classrooms, group discussions can be used to combat the situation since it reduces the number of pupils and scripts to be consulted. Based on this assertion, Elliott and Reynolds (2012) claim that group discussions can help to deal with student-staff ratio. That is to say it reduces the marking load and helps in time management. Elliott and Reynolds (2012) believe that group discussions can eliminate too much competition in the learning environment since all learners have to participate in the respective tasks. In this regard, learners in their discussions learn to collaborate and as such tend to value their group needs than individual ones.

In addition, Elliott and Reynolds (2012) argue that human beings are diverse in nature and therefore group discussions can help learners to tolerate their differences. Also, people have different attitudes as well as different personalities. In this way these group discussions groom tolerance amongst the groups as they learn to accept their differences. In view of this, "[i]ts aim was to improve learner's outcomes in attainment, attitudes and interactive/dialogic behaviour" (Galton 2009: 120). With regard to learner's accommodative nature in group work, Watson

et al. (2002) believe that diverse groups prepare learners for diverse workplaces. This means that the differences in groups produce people who can fit in the world of diversity. Hence they are familiar to people with different views and attitudes.

On the other hand, Christie (2009) argues that in group discussions, the academic gains are limited although they might be accompanied by much positive changes in attitudes. This means that the academic skills might not be gained in these discussions since the learners might not focus on the content that could help them to grow academically. It is not always the case because some learners focus on the content and the effective facilitation from the teacher can help learners to gain academically.

As mentioned above, collaborative learning helps learners to build on trust for each other in the group. The group members serve as a source for each other to achieve required answers. In view of this, Kershner (2012: 3) claims that collaborative learning is connected with the positive social relationship because of the trust that is built amongst the group members during the group discussions. Also, learners get to understand socio-emotional experiences (Kershner 2012: 3). As a result they get to know each other better and can find ways to respond to differences. Thus, group discussions groom learners to be able to understand and accept differences in all spheres of life.

In contrast to the positivity of group work as noted above, Leki (2007: 162) argues that "the group can delay getting together to begin work and can usually count one or more group members who are absent". Ironically, we are of the opinion that a group cannot be delayed by one or two individuals that are absent or late. Those members that are there can continue with the work in the absence of others. The researchers, therefore, cannot suggest on this ground that group work cannot be successful just because of one or two individuals who are running late or absent. To avert such a shortfall, a group can develop rules that can discipline members that come late or stay away without any valid reasons.

Hargreaves et al. (2003) is amongst the many scholars who argue about the limitations of group discussion. He states that "Other practitioners may have concerns about loss of control in the learning environment since it is difficult to be certain that the talk amongst peers is

productive or even about the task” (Galton 2009: 121). However, we still believe that group discussions remain the best method of teaching and learning a second language classroom. In support of the researchers’ belief, Krashen (1982) observes that people learn through interaction especially in a second language. This is in line with the requirements of the National Curriculum which states that learners should be part of their own learning. The limitations provided by the scholars can easily be avoided if the teacher as a facilitator is well informed about the implementation of effective group discussions.

Elliot and Reynolds (2012) also argue that individual assessment better reflects one’s ability than group effort does. Indeed, the marks that the group gets do not reflect the ability of every member of the group. The researchers beg to disagree with them because the purpose of group work is cooperation rather than competition for marks. The aim is for learners to learn from one another thus bridging the gap between fast and slow learners. Furthermore, a group can work effectively if the teacher monitors it and makes sure that all members participate. Learners also learn from one another through group work rather than asking them to work individually.

Still from a negative standpoint, Elliot and Reynolds (2012) further argue that “... inequality of power or contribution...” may exist amongst the members of the group. For instance, not all the learners contribute in group discussion because some are slow learners while others are fast. However, with thorough facilitation from the teacher, this can be prevented. For instance, if a teacher moves around the class and encourages every member of the group to participate, this can prevent the monopolisation of the discussion by certain (strong) individuals. The teacher may also point out a few individuals that are not participating and ask for their views. Inequality of participation can therefore not be cited as the limitation of group work but rather a resource because it is preventable.

Finally, there are alternative ways that could be implemented so as to curb the shortfalls of group discussions which we aim to explore. Due to this factor we believe that group discussions is the best methods of teaching and learning particularly in a Second/foreign Language classrooms as they are characterised by high level of interactions.

METHODOLOGY

Constructivism is much relevant to this paper because it requires the views of people and their understanding/interpretation of group work as well as their experiences towards group work. Also, the paper seeks various views from diverse people that can lead to a better conclusion. It focuses on a specific context and setting in which people work.

Since this study needs people’s ideas and understanding about group discussion, the qualitative approach is more relevant to it than quantitative approach. “Qualitative approach is an approach in which the data is collected in the form of words rather than numbers and it provides a detailed narrative description, analysis or interpretation of phenomena.” (McMillan and Schumacher 2001: 41).

The reason behind choosing the qualitative approach is that our aims and objectives can only be achieved through our understanding of the views of the participants about group work rather than statistics. For example, we are interested in knowing why people like or dislike group work rather than knowing how many people prefer it or not. Also, the qualitative approach is deemed necessary because the techniques to be employed during data collection would be more appropriate to qualitative method than numbers. Qualitative approach is more interactive and in-depth with its conclusions based on the interpretations of experiences and opinions rather than on facts.

These researchers have chosen one-to-one semi-structured interviews as one of our data collection methods. They interviewed both teachers and learners with the use of recorder and the proceeds were transcribed and analysed. According to Creswell (2005) this is a type of data collection in which a researcher seeks to get the participant’s beliefs or opinions about a particular research topic. Also, in this tool, participants have flexibility. We opted to use this collection method because we want to allow our participants enough flexibility. We do not want to limit our participants in terms of the information they should give us. Open ended questions will be asked so as to get the participants’ perception of group work and learners. Due to the weaknesses of interviews, we also rely on Focus Groups as a tool for data collection. Creswell (2005: 300) define focus group as a “care-

fully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment". A focus group allows for less flexibility than a semi-structured interview since the discussion focuses on a defined area of the researcher.

The researchers used the snowball sampling to select schools used in this study. Neuman (2006: 222) defines snowball as an interconnected network of people or organization. We collected the data from three schools where one member was gathering data for his Master thesis and the other member was teaching for community engagement. Our categories of participants are based on age, school grades and academic performance.

"... What we regard as morality and ethics in day-to-day life is a matter of agreement among members of a group" (Babbie 2007: 62). In the case of consent the participant were informed before the interview about the purpose of the research and that if any of the participants does not feel comfortable during the research he/she can stop and bail out. The researchers also guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality where their identities would be concealed in the final report.

The population would comprise the teachers and learners from three high schools. We would have 5 members in each focus group and four teachers would be interviewed from each of the schools.

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

The information that both researchers collected from the field is coded according to our objectives. Thereafter, we came up with the following themes from both the interviews with teachers and the focus group with learners.

- ♦ formation of effective group by teachers
- ♦ group management by learners
- ♦ role of a teacher and
- ♦ group assessments

Formation of an Effective Group

Elliot and Reynolds (2012) are of the opinion that group formation needs more consideration as it may affect the group functioning and outcomes if it is not organized well and strategically. There are several important aspects to be considered when forming a group such as: who

must be responsible to form a group, the need to accommodate individual differences and the size of the group which is the number of members each group should have (Foncha 2013).

Most teachers in language classrooms prefer to form groups instead of letting learners to choose their friends to work with. Teachers say that learners are different in terms of intellectual capabilities, and then it is their duty to make sure that all the abilities are found in each group so that slow learners can get help from the fast learners (Sivasubramaniam 2004). One teacher in the interviews said, "*The learners that you put in one group must have mixed abilities*". The teacher is complimenting the point that learners with same intellectual capability should not be in the same group to avoid the gap between fast and slow learners. Based on this, such a group might be able to foster language learning since the learners with high potential can assist the slow learners. Bringing learners together in terms of their capabilities can help them to learn from each other during their interactions as a team (Elliott and Reynolds 2012).

The following extracts are justifiable evidences for the formation of groups by the teachers;

Teacher 3: *I prefer to group learners by myself because this will give them the chance to rotate within the groups and as a result will learn the different thoughts of the different learners as they rotate within the group. I have seen how slow learners grow so fast when they interact with peers in group work. In a way they build their self confidence and begin to behave like the fast learners.*

Teacher 8: *When you let learners to choose their groups, they will only stick with friends and this always defeat the purpose of group work. In my class, I make sure that friends do not work together as they have the opportunity to interact even out of class.*

Most of the teachers are of the view that "number heads together" is the best method of grouping (Galton 2009). This type of numbering gives each learner a number where all the ones go together and all the twos and threes and fours etc. to prevent the ill-disciplined ones from being in the same group.

Of all the teachers interviewed, only one of them thinks that the learners stand a better place to choose group members because they are the ones to take responsibility. In view of her argument, one of teachers states that

Teacher 3: *Sometimes learners may be given a freedom; however the teacher should be in charge of group formulation because he or she is the one who knows learners better and can form a group that can progress.*

Concerning group formation by the teachers, majority of the learners in the focus groups preferred to be grouped by their teachers due to anticipated challenges in groups and well known reasons to teachers. The following extracts are in favour of group formation by the teacher from the learners.

Learner 1: *The teachers are the only people who know their learners' abilities; so it is crucial for groups to be formed by teachers since they will arrange learners in a way that will benefit the learners and bring development and success to learning. Also, groups being formed by the teacher will avoid groups being dominated by friends which will result to less effectiveness of group.*

Learner 2: *"I prefer the teacher because a friend in class will know that you are good at this and they will want to be in your group while they know that they are not going to do anything."*

In view of the above evidences, this paper suggests that it is a good idea for groups to be formed by teachers to foster peer learning. This improves learning not only from a content point of view but it also teaches the learners how to handle diversity (Foncha 2013), thus preparing them for the workplace (Watson 2002).

It is worthy of notice that the number of students to make up a group is an important aspect as well. All the teachers seem to have the same view about group numbers. One of them says *"It depends on the task given to them but the maximum is six"*. Learners are of the perspective that small groups can be *"progressive"* and beneficial. They feel that being in *"crowded groups"* can hamper effective learning. They also suggest that in large groups, members might not participate in a task. Below are some excerpts from the focus groups:

Learner: *I prefer four members in a group because when we are few it is much easier to concentrate and keep focus on the task than when in a large group.*

Learner 5: *Big groups are less effective because people tend to play instead of working and English is not our language we are afraid to participate in large groups because some*

members will laugh at us when we are grammatically incorrect.

Learner 8: *At least I prefer a group of six members because it is easy to reach an agreement if there is a conflict of ideas.*

Learners prefer smaller groups just because they are manageable. The above argument from the learners echo learners' anxiety and fear when it comes to L2 acquisition (Sivasubramaniam 2011). As compliment to the above, Foncha (2013) states that group work helps learners to realise that they are all at the same level with weaknesses and faults with no one being perfect. He further observes that once the weaker learners come to understand during group discussions that the fast learners are not all knowing, it would give them the courage to overcome their fears and anxieties as they may be disillusioned at the fact that all of them are learning and also that all of them have fault lines.

Gender appears to be another very important factor in group formation. One teacher believes that it is not so important to consider gender balances when forming groups. He says that;

Gender is not a big issue as long as members are doing their work and in the side of performance I think everyone likes to work with high achievers. The focus should rather be on abilities than on gender.

Based on the above, it is needful to blend learner's capabilities whether they are dominated by the same gender or not. Capabilities can be in seen terms of performance where there are fast and the slow learners or in terms of character or behaviour where the teacher puts together the talkative and the introverts.

In contrast, learners have a different perspective on gender. Learners seem to prefer to work in a group that has both genders because they believe that they have different experiences or views in life so they can help the group to have broader ideas. One of them said,

Learner 14: *We can share our experiences and learn from each other if we are of different genders than if we were girls or boys only. Ultimately, the character or personality of a single learner for instance some learners are shy to speak and some have confidence. Therefore, both the shy and the confident learners should be found mixed in a group to make sure that the work is done and also use strategies for those who are shy for example give them a chance to write their ideas down. Some boys only get con-*

fidence to participate so that girls can see him and some girls want to show that they are more intelligent than boys.

Such competition in a group can also foster learning as each camp on attempting to prove its worth works for the progress and benefit of the team. In this regard, behaviour seems to be the most critical factor to consider when forming groups. Overall, most learners would prefer to work with people who are optimistic and who are willing to participate.

Group Management by Learners

On the other hand, some of the learners have different views about the formulation of a group as they appear to be in favour of forming groups by themselves without the involvement of a teacher. They feel that they understand each other better than their teacher, so they know the people they can work with better. The group is easily manageable and can function well if the people within it understand each other and respect each other.

Learner 8: *Forming a group for yourselves is much understandable and much easier because you know the people that you work comfortable with rather than having a teacher forming groups.*

Learner 11: *There are people on the course that I would try not to work with because I don't think they share my view towards work.*

Learner 6: *I suppose it's because I would like to control who goes into the groups I work in. I wouldn't like to just work with anybody; there are people on the course that I would try not to work with because I don't think they share my view towards work. I expect people to work hard all the time and I think there are others who only put effort into assessed work that counts towards their final grade" (Elliott and Reynolds 2012: 8).*

According to Bahar (2003: 470), learners enjoy being engaged in group discussions because they have open ended discursive questions. This is indicative that knowledge does not descend only from the teacher. Learners get knowledge from each other in the group discussions. As such, the teacher is just needed to stimulate or arouse the knowledge as well as the original thinking skills from learners (Sivasubramaniam 2004).

Additionally, the learners prefer group discussions because of a number of reasons Kershner (2012). It is believed that if the learners discuss together and bring out their ideas and explain things; they can find better answers. This is suggestive of the popular saying that "two heads are better than one". Based on this, Kershner (2012) argue that learners can get a better explanation from other learners and some learners can give more relevant examples about something than the teacher does. The learners benefit from other learners differences and different ideas in groups. "... We are all different... I suppose you could call that learning from difference, learning about other people and understanding how they do things" (Kershner (2012: 7). In this way learning from people gives a broader knowledge than it would be in an individual work.

Some of the learners think that they are able to work on their own without the guidance from the teacher but that needs dedication from all the learners. The teacher can only assist when they are stuck in course of their discussion. They feel that they can organize and manage themselves successfully because they need to have a group leader that takes care of everything in the group with the assistance from other members. Some of their thoughts are captured in the following excerpts from the learners

Learner 5: *there must be a group leader who will keep reminding us about working on the task rather than talking about our own things that are not connected to the task That person will also act as a mediator in cases where arguments arise in a group.*

Learner 13: *When those arguments come up, definitely one of us will stand up and tell them to calm down and tell them what we are here for.*

Learners insist that as long as group members are working cooperatively, nothing can stop them from doing the work, with or without a teacher.

However, some of the learners believe that it becomes much easier if the teacher is around because everyone would be likely to participate. Many groups rely on teachers to function well and many learners have a tendency of not wanting to do school work when they are not in the presence of the teacher. Such learners always "want to be pushed from behind in order for them to work that is why it is important to work

in the presence of the teacher". The learners strongly believe that it is always useful to have someone (teacher) around who is knowledgeable about the given task. A cross section of the learners said that it is always important to have a teacher next to them. This is because when there is an unresolved matter due to different ideas, the teacher can arbitrate. Moreover, learners believe that the teacher's role is vital as it keeps everyone focus on a task. That is, the presence of a teacher limits the unaccepted behaviours from learners.

In terms of management, the learners think that there must be a group leader who takes care of everything that is done in the group. They also believe that a group must have rules that can make the task of a group leader to be easy.

Learner 4: *If the group has a group leader that knows his or her work there is no need for the teacher as the group can function on itself. The rules will help to achieve good results because everyone in the group will know what is expected from him or her. It is also important to respect and understand every group member in order for the group to perform in the absence of a teacher. Those who do not adhere to rules and do not participate in group tasks must not get marks.*

According to Elliott and Reynolds (2012), there must be group rules that would help to control group activities. For example if a point is raised, the group members should first discuss it before moving to another point. Many learners want to proceed to the next grade and as such, they are therefore afraid of failing as that might be the consequence of not having marks. In view of this, Kershner (2012) thinks that the presence of a teacher around the groups is very important. The teacher has to intervene where there are disagreements between the learners. The teacher can also assist the groups when there are learners who are out of control.

Learners also believe that in order for every member to participate in the groups, roles must be assigned to everyone. One of them said,

Learner 3: *It is sometimes difficult without the teacher but what makes things easier is to assign duties so that everyone can have something to do. There must be a scribe, presenter, etc.*

Importantly, learners know that everyone is unique so some people are shy and cannot express themselves in front of other people there-

fore the group should have a strategy to deal with these. Learners can become innovative and creative in their groups.

Learner 12: *If you are shy, we give you a pen and a paper to write whatever you think and then you give it to someone else to present it.*

In addition, they believe that in order for every member to participate, the task must be split among all the members. For example, if there are four questions and there are four group members, each member must have their question to answer and there after they will combine it.

Some learners need to be encouraged to participate in group discussion as they hold back themselves. Usually such learners lack confidence of voicing their views. These learners need motivation and encouragement even from their group mates.

Time management is very important and therefore each member of the group has to make time for group sessions. This means learners have to find time which is suitable for everyone. This is to make sure that every member attends group sessions even if it is not during school hours.

Learner 10: *We usually remain behind when we have a task to complete as a group because it is difficult for some of us to go out when we arrive at home after school.*

This shows the importance of attendance for everyone. It is difficult to work as groups sometimes because others may not adhere to rules and others may not execute the task given to them. Learners also believe that the behaviour of some group members makes it difficult to complete the work in time and some members hardly attend the group meetings which result to only a few members doing the task. Furthermore, some learners are unwilling to speak in the target language since they do not want to be mocked by others if they are not fluent in that language. However, learners are confident that the rules that are drafted helps to limit the circumstances that might interrupt them as members who are not committed can be removed from the group.

In terms of group management, learners strongly believe that group work is vital in teaching and learning of a second and foreign language. They believe that it serves as a "back-up" for what was not understood in class. Group discussions also give a chance for learners to practice the target language and improve their

vocabulary at the same time boosting their confidence in speaking the target language. Consequently, it allows learners to explore the subject matter on their own which in a sense helps these learners to improve their content knowledge. It also helps the teacher to identify the strengths and weaknesses of his or her learners.

Teacher's Role in Group Work

Many people believe that group work shifts the concentration of work from the teacher to learners. This belief is based on the fact that learners find information on their own when they work as groups. They tend to forget that group work comes along with its own challenges which demands teacher's attention. Therefore, the teacher has many responsibilities when using groups to teach in class.

Group work is believed to put learners in a better situation to chitchat in the classroom as they are not facing the teacher. *These learners behave only when they see the teacher.* One of the duties of the teacher is to keep the class focused on the task by making sure that there is less noise. The noise level during group discussions has a capacity of disrupting the process of teaching and learning. For this reason, the teacher has to go round the class trying to keep it in order. It is difficult sometimes to tell whether learners are talking about the business in hand or their personal businesses. As the teacher moves round he/she has to make sure that the business is about the task.

Whilst the teacher is visiting each group, she/he should assist in areas of difficulty by trying to clarify and giving clues so that the group can progress with the task.

Teacher 6: *When a teacher spends too much time with one group, the others may lose focus and start talking aloud to an extent that may hinder the learning process for the whole class. When some groups finish way before others, they may disrupt the class with noise. By nature, children need something to keep them focused and busy for them to be quite or in order. Therefore, those groups who happen to finish first should be given extra work to do until others also finish. Making sure that all members of the group are participating in the group work in hand may also assist in managing the class well.*

It is the responsibility of group members to make sure that all group members have an input

in any given task. However, the teacher also has a role to play in making sure that all learners participate. At all times the teacher has to emphasize the importance of participating in a group task and further motivates learners to take part in the group work. Therefore, it becomes teacher's responsibility to outline the purpose and importance of each and every step in the teaching and learning process.

Time is also one factor in the management. In order for the teacher to curb time consumption by group work, the teacher should clearly explain what is required from learners even before they start working on the task. Secondly, instructions should be clear so that learners should not struggle in tackling the task. Thirdly, group tasks that are to be done in classroom should be simple and small so that they do not take the whole slot. To work on the limited nature of time teacher 4 says;

I normally give out group task to be done after school hours. The most suitable time for group discussion is not during the period; learners should be allowed to complete group task during their free time so they can work on it freely without the pressure of time.

It is clear that the role of the teacher in group work is to facilitate and monitor. It is his/her duty to guide learners and further make sure that learners succeed or reach the desired goal. Therefore, it is clear that group work does not necessarily reduce the work upon teachers' shoulders.

Assessment of Group Work

Assessment is also very important in group work. In view of this, one teacher said in her interview that *"If kids know that something is for assessment, they tend to take it serious. It is important to tell them at the beginning of the task that they will be allocated marks at the end so that they start putting all their effort from the onset."*

In this regard, it is always important to have an output or end product that learners will have to produce thereafter. They must know that at the end of the period they have to present or submit a written work.

Group work sometimes makes it difficult to measure the level of understanding to individual learners. It is therefore important to give learners a question to brainstorm as a group and then each individual writes his/ her own report after

the brainstorming. This prevents a situation where the whole group gets a single mark meanwhile some members might not have contributed at all. In this light, group assessment does not reflect individual ability so some learners may tend to hide in a group. Another teacher thinks that *“after a group work there must be individual work to assess individual differences because you cannot assume that learners understood by looking at group performance”*. At the same time she observes that group assessment is relevant because learners have to learn from each other since it helps to measure their understanding against each other.

On the other hand, one of the teachers believes that group work requires full participation from all the group members and as such, assessment should be done in all of them. The mark of the group represents the mark of individual learners in that group. This is based on the belief that all members participated equally in completing the task. It would be difficult if not impossible to measure individual's contribution out of group work when assessing. There are assessment methods that are most suitable for assessing groups.

Oral presentation is one of the assessment methods that are best suitable for group work. Learners are expected to collect information about a particular topic, discuss it then put it together for presentation in class. The group may select one person to present their findings or each and every group member may have his/her own part to present. To encourage absolute participation, one teacher contends that *“It is better to let them all present because some of these learners do not want to do anything. Also, letting learners to present familiarizes them with the podium and improves their speaking ability.”*

Sometimes presentations may have a session of questions whereby the class is allowed to ask questions to the group presenting. This could be a very interesting session yet very informative as presenters have to respond. This also could assess the groups' level of understanding of what they were writing about. One person can present and then others wait for the questions to give answers. This can be very effective because it ensures that every group member has a role to play.

Another method for assessing a group is by submitting a written work for the teacher to mark. The whole group can submit one copy and the

allocated mark goes to all the members. The advantage of this assessment method is that it minimizes the number of papers that the teacher has to mark. This can be helpful especially in overcrowded classrooms. The teacher can finish marking early and bring feedback so that learners can improve on areas of weakness. However, this can be disadvantageous because the mark allocated to the whole group does not reflect the ability or effort of each group member. Not everyone's effort is worth that mark.

One way of overcoming the above mentioned problem is by requesting each individual to write their own work after a group discussion. A teacher may give an essay topic to groups, allow them to brainstorm ideas and then each individual writes separately. The group might write the same ideas but the presentation or argument on those same ideas can never be the same. Although learners have worked in groups, the teacher can assess individual ability in this way. Also, those learners who tend not to take the group serious have to concentrate because at the end of the discussion they must do their own work for marks. However, the teacher must be there to facilitate the discussion to ensure that every member participates.

Group work still remains one of the best learning methods as learners gain knowledge from others (Sivasubramaniam 2004). On the other hand, assessing the individual ability is still a challenge in group work. It is therefore necessary at times to give individual assessment tasks as a teacher. *“The syllabus demands us to give class work and class tests on regular basis”*. This shows that it is necessary to combine assessment methods so that the teacher can know individuals performance.

CONCLUSION

The size of the group is one of the valuable factors to consider in group formation. This factor is also important to avoid chaos and disturbances in groups. Large groups tend to be dysfunctional since not everyone participates fully and it is not easy to identify lazy from hard working learners.

Implementation of effective group work is not only the responsibility of the teacher, but also that of the learners. However, the teacher is also accountable for the proper functioning of the group. This is to say that the teacher should

visit all the groups whether in intermittently. It is also noted that group work is essential in the teaching and learning process particularly in a language class since a language is usually learned through interaction. In a situation where by all the three aspects are successfully implemented, surely group work as a teaching strategy could be effective and the desired goals would be met. Learners imbibe something special in these group discussions. Other studies stipulate that students enjoy being engaged in group discussions because they have open ended discursive questions.

Additionally, the learners prefer group discussions because of the number of reasons. Firstly, another researcher says that if they can discuss together and bring out their ideas and explain things; they can find answers. This means that learners can get better explanation from other learners and some learners can give more relevant examples about something. The learners benefit from learner differences and different ideas in groups. "... We are all different... I suppose you could call that learning from differences, learning about other people and understanding how they do things." In this way learning from people gives a broader knowledge than it could be from an individual work.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In view of the findings, the study recommends that group work is the easiest and facilitative way to manage a large class size. In this regard, teaching should be carried out as social practice against the traditional notion of teacher being the custodian of knowledge.

Looking at what we observed we think it is important that the teacher to form the groups because we believe he or she is the only person that understands the capacity of the learners. Research attests to the fact that people learn through interaction. This can encourage other learners to learn how to speak a language and unconsciously acquire it. In view of this group work is needful in a target language classroom.

We also think it is a good idea to form small groups to avoid a situation where some learners may not participate and thus obligating only the committed ones to do the task. This is because the outcomes of the work produced might not be a true reflection of what all learners know. Group work must surely cater for all learners and

in our opinion, smaller groups can perfectly do this since every learner may have a duty and responsibility to do and time for relaxation is limited.

Furthermore, in group management the teacher should always be available during group work in order to assist and support where learners need help. This can be attributed to the fact that language needs attention in many aspects, especially grammar. The teacher has to be there to make instructions clear and show learners direction to simplify the tasks.

The most important tool for testing group work is the assessment. It should be cautioned that teachers have to be mindful and careful of the assessment methods they use. If one learner is allowed to present on behalf of the group, one cannot be sure if it is a true reflection of all the learners that group.

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