

Collaborative Learning a Must in First Additional Language Learning: The Case of Five Schools

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ABSTRACT Collaborative learning is a teaching strategy that can enhance learning. In view of this, the language of instruction amongst learners must be promoted as the teaching of literacy and academic writing are not only meant for the language teacher, but all the teachers from the different disciplines. It can be said that collaborative learning can pay off at individuals and societal levels. Thus, this paper strives for the use of mixed ability grouping in the teaching of English first additional language. Mixed ability grouping seems to replace the traditional teaching with the teacher at the helm. Collaborative learning creates powerful learning experiences for learners. These experiences may range from understanding the content to developing problem solving capabilities, communicative skills and team building. Methodologically, the study used observation, face to face interviews and questionnaires for data collection. The study made use of 5 learners and two teachers from each of the five schools. The paper used critical discourse analysis as its analytical framework where the themes for analysis were generated by the data.

INTRODUCTION

Group work is when learners are working together to brainstorm and discuss ideas in a given task given by the teacher (Burke 2011). It also affords learners with an understanding of each other since classrooms are inclusive. According to Toseland et al. (2012), group work is a goal-directed activity, which refers to planned, orderly work activities carried out in the context of professional practice with people and these goal-directed activities have many purposes. For instance, group work aims to support or educate members, assist them to socialize, achieve personal growth and provide treatment for their problems and concerns (Coyne 2014). According to Coyne (2014), group work also emphasizes that the learners should have a dual focus within any group; goal-directed activities within individual members and their group as a whole. The Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement CAPS (2012) promotes the use of group work in the classrooms. This is the new curriculum that has been put into practice and it emphasizes the use of group work since it contributes effectively to teaching and learning. Most schools practice group work because they have limited space which is caused by overcrowding in the classrooms (Foncha and Abongdia 2014). The purpose of the study is to look at the functioning and effectiveness of group work. These learners work individually or as a whole class,

often being drawn off-task by social talk while finding themselves in an environment that does not support productive group work (Coetzee 2014).

Based on this, Blatchford (2005) states that the use of groups in classrooms has demonstrated that the effective use of learners grouping in primary and secondary schools is a 'neglected art' and is viewed by many teachers as problematic. In view of this, Galton et al. (1980) argue that within a majority of primary school classrooms, children sit in groups but rarely interact and work as groups. Instead, learners work individually or as a whole class, often being drawn off-task by social talk while finding themselves in an environment that does not support productive group work. Other studies have also shown that both teachers and learners have difficulties implementing peer and interactive group-work in classrooms. Furthermore, while various learner groupings have been found in classrooms, these groupings have rarely supported the types of learning tasks assigned to them where both the teachers and learners rarely received training that could facilitate effective group-working skills (Blatchford et al. 2005)

Literature Review

Burke (2011) found that cooperative learning improves student's achievement and creates a climate of success. Groups have more informa-

tion than an individual working alone on a given task. Groups have greater resources to tap on more information available because of the variety of backgrounds and experiences that learners have (Burke 2011). Furthermore, when working in groups learners can put more effort, use higher-order thinking skills more often and they can also retain the material for a longer period of time. Learners also teach each other new concepts which tend to increase their understanding of the material. However, Erickson et al. (2006) are of the opinion that “group grades are common with teachers when assessing cooperative learning projects, but can be unfair and cause students to resent each other”. Moreover, “sometimes lower-achieving students piggyback on the students who take the most initiative and do the most work” (Foncha and Abongdia 2014). In these cases, some less-motivated students are given grades that do not represent their mastery of the content. Students may also become too dependent on each other and lose the motivation to work independently. Thus, Foncha and Abongdia (2014) argue that the main objective of group work is not the assessment, rather it is learning that is at the core this kind of learning is seen as social practice where learners learn almost effortlessly in an anxiety reduced environment.

Burke (2011) further suggests that students who are engaged in group problem solving activities are more committed to get to the solution and are better satisfied with their participation in the group than those who were not involved. In this way, students can gain a better understanding of themselves (Erikson et al. 2006). Group work allows people to gain a more accurate picture of how others see them. The feedback that they receive may help them better evaluate their interpersonal behavior. In contrast, when students are sitting close to each other, they can easily get distracted with a chat, lose precious class time and cause disruptions for other groups.

In light of the above, Orstein (1990) opines that it is better to manage activities of a group than those of an individual. Being a member of a group influences the behavior of an individual and the major categories of learner’s behavior. These categories are said to require the teacher to have some expertise knowledge in classroom management. In group work, the teacher needs to build a group spirit that is conducive to teach-

ing and learning and this spirit can avert misbehavior by the learners at its minimum level. This is in line with the view that discipline and classroom control are produced through the group atmosphere and enhanced through group participation by the learners. The teacher may also play the role of settle down the conflict among the learners in order to maintain a favorable group surface behavior (Orstein 1990). Grouping students is seen as a very effective method or way of teaching because many researchers find it very useful.

According to Coyne (2014), students who work in groups have the chance to practice communication skills, have empathy for others and conflict resolution. He further explains that students learn to appreciate diversity and understand how to cooperate with peers. In some cases, group work leads to more participation, because shy students may feel more comfortable sharing their thoughts and ideas with a few students instead of with the whole class. Bloom (1956) argued that, there may be pressure from the group to conform to the majority opinion. He further explains that, most learners do not like conflict and may attempt to avoid it when possible. Nevertheless, an individual may agree to a bad solution just to avoid conflict. Hence, this may lead to members not gaining satisfaction from the group just because they feel too alienated in the decision making process. In schools there must be awareness where learners are be coached on how to work as a team. This can help to avoid the conflict amongst other learners and they can gain knowledge and cooperative skills from other learners.

Burke (2011) suggests that learners learn best when they are actively involved in the process. Students who participate in collaborative learning and educational activities outside the classroom and who interact more with group members and teachers get better grades. These students are also more satisfied with their education and are more likely to remain in school (Burke 2011). Additionally, employers want to employ people who possess the ability to work in groups and have developed suitable team work skills (Burke 2011). Burke’s presentation does not deny the significance of traditional teaching and instructor led discussions, but an increasing number of teachers are recognizing the value of assigning collaborative work to their students. Small group work used both in and out of class,

can be an important supplement to a class, helping students to master concepts and apply them to situations calling for complex applications of critical thinking skills. In view of this, Dale (1965) posits that a teacher should be prepared with where the group experience fits into the overall curriculum, what the overall purpose is and what the learning goals are and whether the learning goals are sufficiently specific, clear, worthy, realistic and achievable. The teacher has to make sure the activities are meaningful and the time to accomplish these goals should be sufficient.

Other researchers focus more on strategies that will make group work successful in schools and how the environment should be. Latané et al. (1927) believe that group work should be more therapeutic and should be in a calming environment in order for it to be more effective and for learners to be comfortable in the environment that they are working in. They further believe that the physical space should contribute to the relaxed and reassuring atmosphere, encouraging emotional space in the learners mind. If the teacher wishes to work with individuals or small groups rather than with mass class assignments and instruction, he must begin the school year with the building of self-discipline on that part of the student (Dale 1965). It should be their responsibility to determine what rules need to operate in a classroom where the teacher works with small groups and balance of the class is engaged in an independent study or in group activities. Dale (1965) believes that learners need to learn when and how to talk in both small and large groups, when to listen, when to read, and when to write.

Galton et al. (1980) noticed a positive relationship between group work and student achievement which can lead to higher future earnings for students. Bloom (2010) argues that learner performance can depend on classroom work. This means that the work that is being done in class must be suitable for the level that the learner is in. In addition, Toseland et al. (2012) argue that learner performance depends on strategies that the teacher uses in his or her lesson. This means that it is not class size only that affects the learner's performance. Cohen (1994) found evidence that a learner who struggles in school benefits more from group work and they also argue that class size is positively related to student achievement.

Long (1985) states that pedagogues have recommended small group work in the second language classrooms because it increases language practice opportunities since learners use the language to communicate and to find information. He believes that group work promotes a positive affective climate and it motivates learners (Long 1985). Micheal et al. (1985) are also in favour of group work because it is concerned with increasing the quantity of language practice in order to improve the quality in the manner in which learners communicate to create a positive and affective climate in the classroom and learners' motivation. Furthermore, group work increases the practice of language opportunities (Michael et al. 1985). Based on the above observations, group work improves in the way learners speak and it also helps in developing grammatical accuracy. In view of this, Micheal et al. (1985) argue that "It is unlikely, however to promote the kind of conversational skills students need outside the classroom where accuracy is often important but where communicative ability is always at a premium." Grouping is recommended though it comes with its own problems (Elliot 1984).

According to Micheal et al. (1985), group work helps to individualize instructions. This means that the learners can understand given instructions individually and also be in the position to interpret the given instructions on their own in their respective groups. In view of this, group work promotes a positive and affective climate. For example, the shy learners are able to express themselves freely within their groups and the learners who are not good at public speaking can fit into the group. In this way, it reduces the stress levels when they have to speak publicly in the classroom.

There are individual differences among children both in innate intelligence, attainment and children's progress at the different rates. Ability grouping makes it possible to grade work given to pupils so that they are able to progress. However it needs careful planning and preparation. Galton et al. (1980) states that a teacher has to have skills in classroom management because grouping learners might give rise to discipline problems. In this regard, it can be concluded that group work can be a disaster in the hands of a young inexperienced teacher.

METHODOLOGY

The study is interpretive in nature based on the case study of five schools through the use of the qualitative method. The data was collected through observation, face to face interviews and questionnaires. The study made use of 5 learners from each school and two teachers. The learner's data was collected through interviews based on the value of group work, noise level and the use of English as the medium of instruction, while that of the teachers also included teaching strategies in an English first additional language classroom.

RESULTS

Table 1 indicates how learners from different schools in the senior phase value group work, view noise level and the use of medium of instruction when they are working in groups.

Table 1: The value of group work in the senior phase

| <i>School</i> | <i>Value of group work (in percent)</i> | <i>Noise level (in percent)</i> | <i>Using English as MOI (in percent)</i> |
|---------------|---|---------------------------------|--|
| School 1 | 95 | 80 | 65 |
| School 2 | 81 | 76 | 45 |
| School 3 | 76 | 72 | 55 |
| School 4 | 92 | 85 | 42 |
| School 5 | 77 | 79 | 62 |

In the schools that were observed, the researcher found that group work is mostly used in the senior phase (grades 8 and 9). Based on the study, almost all of the learners said that group work is very effective in their English class which means that 98 percent of the participants say that they see the importance of group work as a teaching and learning strategy. Furthermore, the study indicates that the learners are rowdy when working in groups and this disturbs other groups that are focusing on the same task that the educator has given. The researcher also found out that the learners use English (the medium of instruction) sometimes when conducting their discussions in groups.

Table 2 indicates how learners from different schools in the FET phase, view noise level and the use of Medium of instruction when they are working in groups. In view of this, the researcher

found that these schools use group work and seem to find it as effective. These learners argue that the medium of instruction to be used for learning and teaching should be in the English in the classrooms since the content is in English. This way, it can improve the learners writing, speaking and reading skills which are needed when it comes to assessments in terms of tests, examinations etc. The study also indicated that the noise level when learners are working in groups is high. The researcher further observed that there is a lot of noise from the learners when they are working in groups. Furthermore, the findings suggest that the noise is as a result of the learners not adhering to the rules given by the teacher. The data showed that learners do not always use English when working in groups. Learners always make an attempt to use the English medium of instruction in their groups because they claim that it assists them in the learning English.

Table 2: Noise level and the use of medium of instruction

| <i>School</i> | <i>Value of group work (in percent)</i> | <i>Noise level (in percent)</i> | <i>Using English as MOI (in percent)</i> |
|---------------|---|---------------------------------|--|
| School 1 | 95 | 75 | 65 |
| School 2 | 79 | 76 | 58 |
| School 3 | 72 | 73 | 58 |
| School 4 | 90 | 79 | 60 |
| School 5 | 78 | 78 | 63 |

Table 3 indicates English teacher's opinions from the different schools on the effectiveness of group work in both Senior and FET phases. The data from the participants revealed that teachers agree that group work in an English classroom has a positive impact on the learners' performance. The teachers were able to identify learner's abilities which give them the motivation to group learners based on these abilities. The results also indicated that all of the teachers (100%) find group work in an English class effective since it evokes engagement and participation. In addition, the results further indicated that the teachers see the noise generated from the groups as part of the learners' learning process. Therefore, the teacher has set out rules to monitor the discussions among the learners.

It can also be observed that the teachers rarely use English when setting out groups to work

Table 3: Teacher's views on group work

| <i>School</i> | <i>Value of group work (in percent)</i> | <i>Noise level (in percent)</i> | <i>Using English as MOI (in percent)</i> | <i>Use Teaching Strategies (in percent)</i> |
|---------------|---|---------------------------------|--|---|
| School 1 | 100 | 61 | 76 | 76 |
| School 2 | 100 | 61 | 61 | 81 |
| School 3 | 100 | 58 | 62 | 79 |
| School 4 | 100 | 52 | 72 | 81 |
| School 5 | 100 | 70 | 73 | 84 |

in the classroom. Teachers use different strategies in order to meet with the diversity of learners in the classroom. The study showed that a majority of the teachers believe that role switching is one of the best strategies. This involves learners switching roles that they have played within the group. For instance, if one learner was the chair of the group in the previous task, the same learner can change to a scribe for the group in the next session.

DISCUSSION

The results of the study show that group work has a productive and positive impact on learner engagement and participation. In view of the above, both the teachers and the learners find group work in an English classroom very effective. This is true because it directs the learners' attention to the lesson at hand. Furthermore, the slow learners benefit because they can understand and learn from the bright learners (Foncha 2013). However, a few learners were disappointed with the group dynamics as there seem to be challenges with commitment and communication among them.

The interview results also indicated that group work affects learners' behavior because some of them are focused on their work. The study also found that group work is commonly used in English classes in the FET phase. This may be caused by the fact that teachers in the FET phase find group work as a strategy that is suitable to use since learners in this phase are older and are not rowdy as compared to the senior phase. Ironically, group work may also have a negative impact as some members may fail to participate in their groups. According to Blatchford et al. (2005), group activities the learners may lack concentration, interpretation skills and more engagement when they work alone. In view of this, the teachers agreed that group work may

affect learner-involvement in the lesson because learners seemingly make a lot of noise and their loud noises can hinder the progress of the lesson. Those who are not confident to talk in front of others may not participate and this can limit them in their learning process (Toseland et al. 2012).

Group work can affect learners academically because some learners said that sometimes their group tasks are assessed by other groups as a result, they may end up failing the task. Also it may affect learners because when they are writing class tests, assignments and examinations, they may not recall what was taught to them in class because they were not concentrating (Foncha and Abongdia 2014). Summarily, group work can affect learners' performance because it might disengagement in the lesson when these learners lead to interact during group discussions.

It was also revealed that small group strategies can be effective if used diligently. This can only be realised with the group of those who are willing to. Finally, the results revealed that with small groups, every one of them is likely to engage and participate. This is based on the fact that small groups of people can be focused and determined to do their work.

CONCLUSION

The study established that there is not enough research done on teachers and how group work affects the teacher as well as the learners. Moreover, group work does not only have an impact on learners but also on teachers. The researchers focused on learners and teachers. There is enough justification for researchers to focus on how group work in the senior and FET phase can affect learners' achievement, classroom engagement/participation and learners' behaviour. Thus, the teachers teach English and they have different teaching strategies in the classroom. Further studies need to be done

so as to help teachers to develop strategies to make group work effective in every phase at high school level.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Department of Basic Education needs to organize workshops that can help to train teachers to use different group work strategies. Secondly, teachers need to encourage learners to use English on a regular basis since it is the lingua Franca commonly used globally. For these groups to function properly, the government must make financial provision for resources that can cater for group work activities. Finally, teachers need to constantly reshuffle the groups to avoid intimacy, disruption and noise or to give the opportunity for learners to be able to interact with a wide diverse other.

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