Using Group-work with Large University Class

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Abstract
This research paper presents a classroom research model carried out through the handout distribution and group-discussion technique. It determines the efficacy and usefulness of task-oriented, in-class interactive exercise in a large class.

Today one sees unending emphasis of an almost entire bulk of modern research on the learner-centered approach as the most useful of its kind. Motivated by this ever-increasing emphasis, we also attempted to give this approach a try in the large classroom situations and we found it extremely productive in the context of the depth of students' interest in it and the consequent benefit and pleasure they derived from the activity while they accomplished the task which was otherwise something rare to happen in a large class.

Introduction

Using group work in the large university class is a recent trend in academia. In many cases they have been going on experimental basis. The idea has its pros and cons. Pros in terms of learning and cons in terms of time spent in the activity. While doing this exercise as an experiment to see the outcome we came across a number of obstacles in implementation of this activity before we practically started it in the class but we were also duty-bound to come out with remedial measures in order to initiate this activity in an error-free manner.

The following factors were considered while doing the study.
1. Expansion of the ideas under discussion
2. Provoking students' creative capabilities
3. Promoting students' power of persuasion and inventive abilities
4. Helping students accumulate maximum information on this issue.

5. Assisting students inculcate in themselves convictions.
6. Developing in students' courage to express these convictions with confidence.
7. Encouraging students do things themselves as they are at the threshold of their practical careers.

Some controversial and debatable ideas extended into un-spared exchange of views, which are titled below:

1. Man's consciousness of Reason and its exercise has brought him less benefit. He was happier before he learnt the use of this faculty than he, today, is after its unhindered use. And that the world in ancient times was a far better place than it today is, with all its ultra modern technological claims.

2. Man is essentially an emotional rather than rational being. Emotion is much superior to reason. And man ought to be governed more by emotions than reason.

3. All forms of physical disabilities and deformities among men; like: selective endowment of genius upon a few individuals, differences and discriminations based on caste, color, creed, class and gender, advantages and disadvantages shooting forth from socio-cultural and religious and political reasons, are all either various forms of divine maintenance of balance in the overall scheme of things or an integral part of man-engineered and operated plan.

4. The remedy to all social evils lies in either readily responding to Rousseau' call for natural for 'Return to Nature' i.e. to the primitive natural state of renouncing and relinquishing all social claims or moving further and faster into mechanical and materialistic world.

Purpose: Enhancing Speaking Skills
Task Technique: Group Discussion

Task
- Discuss the issue under consideration.
- Form opinion after careful analysis and detailed discussion.
- Furnish proof to substantiate their decision.

Rationale

Real and live situation inviting hot debate and impulsive speech-cum compulsive communication is fairly expected to initiate learners into the most natural mode of speaking.

- Time for Discussion: 30 minutes
- Presentation Time Period (for each group): 05-07 minutes

Research Site

BS Part-II Class at Institute of English Language and Literature, University of Sindh, Jamshoro

Research Participants

All students of BS Part-II at Institute of English Language and Literature, University of Sindh, Jamshoro

Research Instrument

Group Discussion through handout

Theme for Discussion

There was a group with two baby daughters: one of 13 years, the other of 06 years. A friend of the man advised him to divorce his wife and marry some other educated, glamorous woman as the present one was neither helped nor gave company at social events because of being uneducated. The attributes of the man and his wife was listed in the boxes before them they were directed to discuss the them in detail, and suggest to that the man should do in the given situation.

Man	His Wife
• Smart • Highly qualified • Grade 18 officer • Lots of extra income • Owns lands • Has a lot of political power • Has busy social life • Good natured	• Average in looks • Uneducated • Rural background • Highly devoted to family • Lacks fashion and sophistication • Can't help her husband socially • Committed and respectful to whole family of her husband

Having all the above ideas in our mind we decided to go for the practical aspect of the study.

Literature Review

Willis (1996, 36) confirms that class oriented activity should be a goal-oriented communicative activity with a specific outcome, where the emphasis is on exchanging meanings, not producing specific language forms.

According to Brown (1994), group work creates a favorable climate for communication by relieving students of the anxiety of having to talk in front of the whole class.

There can be discussion on certain points regarding mind maps, which can further clarify and add to the ideas (Hedge 1988; 30). Various points of discussions or sections of an argument become easily apparent. Hedge (1988; 45) believes that we do not think in an ordered or linear way (because our mind always remains in a state of flux), but rather explores a topic by moving between its various aspects. The elements would, therefore, be added in random fashion. Mind mapping technique is particularly useful for classroom activities, which require discussion and arguments for and against the topic.

Byrne (1988, 31) is of the opinion that group and pair work also increases the speaking time for each student in class. Each group takes its turns and does so within the stipulated time.

Ideal group would be that of seven to eight students. Bell (1988) suggests that the group should have a range of three to seven students.

Hess (2001) considers it imperative that teacher should design the large class in such a manner that students may share their own future plans, explore their ideas on future issues, take stand on controversial topics, apply their special knowledge to current concerns.

People learn in many ways. Sometimes they learn on their own, other times they learn from others, still other times they learn through interaction with others. A study by Snider and Schnurer (2002) reveals that people learn 10 percent of what they read, 20 percent of what they read and hear, 30 percent of what they see, 50 percent of what they see and hear, 70 percent of what they say, 90 percent of what they say and apply in life, and 95 percent of what they interact with others. Well-planned and well-implemented group activities result in the achievement of the last three optimum categories. This is what is also true of the Activity in question.

An important goal of education is to prepare students to function well in their professional work, family relationship and community development. Success in these areas requires a complex set of socio-academic skills such as interpersonal communication, cooperation, tolerance of diverse views, commitment to support one another, and conflict resolution in an amicable manner. These skills are thoroughly practiced in Group Activities like the one in question. Saluin (1990) examined the effects of 68 studies on learning through Group Activities/ Discussions and found 49 (72 percent) positive cases. This is a quite a high success rate.

Johnson, Johnson and Houlbec (1990) lists benefits of learning things by way of group work, as under:

- Higher-level reasoning strategies and increased critical reasoning competencies
- Greater ability to view situations from others' perspectives
- Less disruptive and more on task behavior
- Greater collaborative skills and attitudes necessary for working with others
- Increases pro-social behavior
- Increased attendance
- More positive attitudes towards learning, teacher, and educational institution
- Boost to self-esteem in students, self esteem is person's own judgment about his/ her own worth. Amongst the students self esteem is strongly influenced by how well a student achieves in performance and how well his / her peers and teachers like him. Group Activity tends to increase student achievement and enhances peer acceptance.

Methodology and Procedure
The study was conducted principally through group discussion. The students discussed and analyzed item(s) for argumentation in the form of pertinent draft. The students read out the final draft of discussion-analysis in front of the audience with an aim to justify their assertions. Teacher formally concluded student presentations with his expert opinion, and evaluated as well as grade the performance of each group.

The teacher introduced the exercise, emphasizing its profits and by announcing the code of conduct as already given by him in the handout for carrying out the group Activity. He, then, distributed the handouts and sets the ball rolling.

As a requirement of the group discussion activity, the teacher allowed the learners full freedom of expression, use of notes, print material and references from available literature. The teacher allowed the students ample time for their creative verve. The total span of this interactive exercise was spread over two to three hours. The strength of the class was around eighty students of undergraduate level. Each group was of eight students.

Feedback was received by filling up of Evaluation Form exclusively prepared for this purpose. The teacher also took notes during feedback presentation as guidelines for future line of action.

The teacher convinced the students of the effectiveness and profitability of the activity both in terms of enhancement of individual, professional leadership qualities and teamwork skills as well as better academic and examination preparation of the courses under study. The teacher ensured the availability of the requisite classroom setting for the intended to-be implemented activity i.e. group formation, seating arrangement, purchase of prize for the winning group, making required number of handouts along with worksheets. He constituted a committee of students for the purpose of formation of groups and making necessary seating arrangements.

The teacher explained to the students in the clearest terms as to how they are to go about the entire exercise. He also asked all the students; whether they were in complete understanding of what they were required to do and whether there were any queries to be made, confusions to be addressed, and complications to be explained.

The Teacher distributed the required material among students with the help of five randomly selected students so that it is done within stipulated time. The students of the respective group selected their group leaders. The teacher stayed alert throughout the activity. He made himself the hub and pivot of the whole effort. He kept wondering around among different working groups encouraging individually and guiding them for required performance. He explained to the class that they were going to attempt free thinking, free talking

and free-writing for 'getting started and developing ideas'. He asked students to brainstorm individually for a few minutes and to jot down their thoughts on the different points related to the topic/ theme under discussion. He asked students to close their eyes and think about the topic under discussion, and he directed the students to jot down all the things associated with the topic that may come to their minds. The participants shared their thoughts with the group members in order to have a clear view, and related vocabulary. The teacher suggested students to go on jotting down the outcome of each of the points shared, argued upon, discussed and debated upon, and also told them to keep on taking notes of all the important points of view, arrived at unanimously. The Teacher, apart from threading through the groups, interacting with them, also made a mind-map on the white board. It helped the students in associating and linking ideas, which may come to the mind randomly.

Mind-Map Specimen
- Theme: Life in Countryside vs. Life in Metropolis
- A Comparative Analysis between City Life and Village Life

City Life   **Village Life**

Advantages	Disadvantages	Advantages	Disadvantages
Cinema	Cut throat competition	Nature at its best	Lack of education
Education	Rigorous life style	Peace of mind	Lack of gas
Clubs	Stress	Cordial social relationships	Lack of electricity
Electricity	Lack of fellow feelings	Strong family bonds	Poor medical facilities
Medical facility	Less mental tranquility	Pollution-free environment	Poor media facilities
Gas	Accidents	Low cost living	Poor living condition
Picnic points	Pollution	Stress free life style	Lack of shopping malls
Cable TV	High cost living	Better relations	Lack of transport

Advantages	Disadvantages	Advantages	Disadvantages
Sports	Utility bills	Unadulterated food	Inadequate sports facilities
Transport	Wastage of time	Social gatherings	Debilitated roads
Internet	High cost education	Fresh fruits and vegetables	Inadequate infrastructure
Email	Inadequate water	No noise pollution	Poor Sanitation

Task Analysis

Some ten students were randomly selected to give their views on the merits and demerits of the activity carried out in the classroom. The gist of their talk asserted that this kind of in-class group activity afforded them a chance to come out of the cocoon of shyness and hesitating expression. That, by working with others (in groups), they learnt to behave in better terms, restrain their emotions and gain greater emotional stability. They also observed that this kind of activity strengthens student-teacher relationship; and also enhanced between them the feelings of mutual trust, understanding and appreciation.

Feedback by the Participants:

The main points which emerged from the students' feedback were as follow:

- Group activity helped them reduce reliance on cramming and rely more on their creative potential.
- Students got to know one another better.
- Their communicative skills improved.
- They (students) went beyond books and learnt to grow imaginative.
- They learnt to believe in themselves and what they said.
- Their power of persuasion and expression increased.
- Class environment grew friendlier and more congenial through interaction.

- They were able to remove misunderstandings, through working together, by being positively interdependent and through open dialogue making.
- They grow more fluent.
- They learnt to act rationally and logically.
- They learnt to express dissent without being impolite.
- They learnt to express difference of opinion while not disrespecting the views of their counterparts.
- They were able to generate enormous chunks of information on the issue(s) under discussion by accumulating views of as many as eighty different minds on the same subject. This accumulated information was expected to help them in examinations they would appear in academic as well as professional careers.
- This group discussion minimized gender gap.
- They achieved versatility, as they brought in references during discussion from the literature of the other languages as well.
- They gained confidence in public speaking.
- They became effective time managers.
- They grew more disciplined.
- They grew democratic in their attitudes.

Obstacles Encountered and Remedial Measures Taken

Lack of skill in the students for this kind of activity could be addressed through additional explanation and instructions. Sometimes, the task could be modified to suit the students' ability. A peer or teacher can also provide additional tutoring outside the class. Lack of will can be taken care of by influencing the students' level of concern regarding the importance of carrying out and completing the work. Certain amount of credit marks could be also offered by way incentive and reward.

There were problems of making slow and smart ones work together. We ensured that the groups learning through joint action were heterogeneous with respect to the ability level, gender, ethnicity, socio-cultural background of the students. To create sense of self

importance for each group member, apart from the group incharge, the other students could be assigned minor roles to do during group discussion activity for instance, one may act as a reader, the other as recorder, yet an other as a voice-controller, yet an other as a manager, courier or interrogator, so on and so forth.

Time constraint was another problem that we faced. We had to borrow class hours from our colleagues whose classes were due during the session.

Some of the students felt uncertain about this task and there was an apprehension that they would not stay longer. We had to inspire them with incentives like credit marks etc. The students were provided a conducive environ. They were allowed to eat and drink inside the classroom. The idea was to let the students feel comfortable and relaxed.

Conclusion

Learning through Group Discussion Activity as experimented practically in a large classroom situation was found to be successful in all target areas. We conclude that students' learning ability is enhanced through such activities. The activity also removed doubts and reservations of the participating students in all groups. The positive results of this activity motivated us to recommend the use of group work activities in the large classes to our fellow English Language Teachers.

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