Utilizing Group Work Effectively in EFL Class to Enhance Students' Speaking Ability

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ABSTRACT: *The development of English as an international language has boosted the emphasis on communicative requirements in English learning and teaching in Vietnam. Hence, students are able to use the target language for communicative purposes is considered as one of the main goals in foreign language teaching and learning. Despite of the need for communicative skills, many Vietnamese teachers still use Grammar –translation method in their EFL classes. As a result, students have poor speaking ability and fail in real-life communication. Group work provide more opportunities for language practice. It also creates a positive atmosphere in classroom for students to freely interact that improves their communicative skills. From the benefits of group work, it is essential to conduct a study which can prove the effectiveness of group work activities for enhancing students' speaking ability. The aim of this work can only attained by collecting and analyzing data, so selecting study methods has be done thoroughly and accurately. The current paper aims to present the utilization of group work in EFL class at a university. Qualitative methodology is applied to collect data. This section is for concluding the proposal information rather than assuming the results of the research.*

I. INTRODUCTION

One of the main aims in foreign or second language learning and teaching is students' target use for communication. Chaiyasuk (2013) states that speaking is the most important skill in revealing successful language study; language use shows students' language acquisition. In Vietnamese education system, English is a core and obligatory subject in the curriculum from primary school to university. It is considered as a necessity in Vietnamese society because English needs for daily communication, employment and further studies as well. Indeed, to improve students' English communicative skills, To (2014) stresses that it is important for Vietnamese students to be taught good listening and speaking skills.

Despite of the need for communication skills in Vietnam, most teachers continue to use Grammar - Translation method in English classes (Le 2011). This traditional method focuses on acquiring the structures of language rather than how to use language. Teachers often give theories, explanations, examples, and exercises. Students become passive learners and do not have any chances for oral practice. A survey was conducted by Bao and Tomlinson (2004) reveals that many teachers do not want to change their teaching methods. As a result, the teacher-centred teaching language method produces students who may achieve the high grades in the national examination of grammar, vocabulary and reading, but fail to effectively communicate in real-life situations (Le 2011). Hoang (2001) also adds that Vietnamese students feel embarrassed and lack confidence in communicative skills. In fact, my freshmen have learned English at least for eight years, but now they are not willing to communicate inside classroom and cannot communicate correctly in real-life situations outside classroom. They are bad at speaking English.

Based on this problem, I want to conduct a study utilizing group work effectively in order to improve students' speaking ability. Group work is one of the classroom activities in Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) that provides a context for peer-to-peer learning; group work activities engage students to others in meaningful

interaction for developing oral skills (Burdett & Hastie 2009). To gain the aim of my research, the research question is raised as follow: "What are the advantages of using group work to improve students' speaking ability?".

II.　RATIONALE FOR THE INNOVATION RESEARCH

Brown (2001, p. 177) defines that "group work is a general term covering a variety of techniques in which two more students are assigned a task that involves collaboration and self-initiated language". The use of group work activities in EFL classroom has been supported by pedagogical arguments. Group work and its advantages are also discussed and illustrated in previous researches. Therefore, I decide to use group work in my teaching for non-majored students because of the following reasons.

- *Improve students' oral skills*

Harmer (2003) points out that group work provides students more opportunities to interact and use freely the target language. Instead of teacher's dominant talk in traditional language class, in my classroom, students can participate longer in small groups to exchange opinions, practice new structures, and have multiple interactions. Brown (2001) also adds that group work activities provide chances for student initiation, face-to-face communication, practice negotiation of meaning, extended conversation exchanges, and students of role adoption. Thus, language learning becomes more meaningful because students can use language to talk about something that is interesting, contextualized and related to them rather than just memorizing or drilling. From these points, I recognize that group work not only increases the quantity of language practice chances, but also improves the quality of students' language use. Face-to-face communication in a small group is a natural context for conversation. Therefore, I will use group work to engage my students in coherent and cohesive series of utterances and the creative language; thereby they can develop communicative competence in English language.

- *Develop students' collaborative learning*

Group work is one of classroom activities in CLT that provides a setting for peer-to-peer learning (Burdett & Hastie, 2009). In face-to-face communication in group work, students are learning to collaborate with their peers. They are in a process of discussing and learn how to ask information, evaluate ideas, monitor work and prepare a presentation together. A study conducted by Salas (2005) shows that group work promotes students' oral skills and collaborative learning, encourages students to generate ideas. As students are explaining and clarifying their own viewpoints when solving a problem or exploring a matter, they are enhancing their linguistic competence and their communicative competence as well. Consequently, group work gives students the best stage to "show off" and apply what they have newly known. They may get peer encouragement and support such as feedback on errors. Thus, getting students work in groups, I also teach them an important life skill – collaboration. By the way of collaborative learning, group work will influence my students' attitudes and develop their interpersonal relationships, which play an important part in their present and future life.

- *Get students exposure to real-life situations for language use*

In all possibility, one of the primary reasons for low achievement by many EFL students is simply that they do not have enough time for language practice; they do not use language in real situations. These result in them having inability in communicating correctly. Salas (2005) affirms that group work gives students exposure to a range of language items and language functions. Through group work activities such as role-play, interview, problem-solving, information gap, drama, students get exposure to real-life English language environments that enable them to use English for expression and communication. Meng (2009) finds that in group work activities, students can undertake roles and adopt positions and produce a range of language functions related to those role and positions that would otherwise impossible. For instance, students can suggest, hypothesize, generalize or disagree in a problem-solving activity. Hence, contrary to the teacher-fronted classrooms where students just get instruction in vocabulary and grammar, I apply group work activities to maximize opportunities for students to use the target language in real situations that make up their speaking competence.

- *Create active learning environment*

Obviously, in the traditional context of whole-class work, students may experience some negative psychological factors that obstruct their language acquisition and learning. They are afraid of being wrong and losing face in public, especially students have limited English proficiency. Then, well-organized small group work can create a relaxing atmosphere in classroom for optimal learning (Jiang 2009). Working in groups, students suddenly become active participants; they are individually involved in lessons more often. A research of Ibnian (2012) points out that group work is an effective method to motivate students and encourage active learning in classroom. Instead of sitting alone trying to understand something difficult, in group work students can discuss, assist and cooperate with each other to gain common goals. Therefore, to change classroom environment where students receive knowledge passively, I apply group work to encourage them to actively participate in various classroom activities. I want to make all types of student value and benefit from this active setting of learning and become more flexible, autonomous and successful students as well.

From the points and arguments above, I think that using group work in my teaching can address the issue on improving my students' speaking skills. The duration of my research is ten weeks, starting the 5nd of October and ending the 7th of December, 2020. I will implement the innovation during seven weeks with five lessons using group work activities such as: role-play, interview, problem-solving and information gap. Each lesson lasts three periods. These lessons and group activities are based on the course textbook – Speakout –elemantary. In the first two weeks, I will introduce my innovation and make students familiarize with my new way of teaching. From week 3 to week 7, I begin to collect data. Then I analyse gathered data and make conclusion in the last three weeks.

Innovation in language education has been a subject that both teachers and researchers are interested since the early days of English language teaching. Rogers (2003) explains that an innovation is an idea, practice, or object perceived as new by an individual or other adopters, innovation resides in perception; how something is new by teachers, principals, administrators or others engaged in its implementation. To implement innovation, it is important to consider factors which account for success or failure of innovation. According to Markee (1997), the main players in innovation of language teaching are teachers, but many other individuals also have a stake in the innovation process. In my research context of innovation, besides my desire and effort – a researcher's to carry out the innovation and good facilities in my university; I need to consider other factors such as appropriateness in students' needs and social development; participants' cooperation in the innovation research; and my choice of research methodology and methods. Social and cultural aspects are specially related to innovation of English language teaching (Carless 2013). In Vietnamese cultural context, the teacher role remains traditionally authoritative as source of knowledge; interactive whole-class teaching is more common than independent student work in pairs or groups.

III.   PARTICIPANTS

One of my classes at Dong Nai Technology university will be chosen to take part in my research, including twenty-five females and five males whose ages range from eighteen to twenty. This is a pre-intermediate level class. They are none-majored freshmen. They have different English proficiency levels. All students in my university have to take two foundation English courses in the first year. Every course lasts thirty periods. Every week the students have three periods of English.

IV.   METHODOLOGY

As we know, there are methodologies which we can use to conduct a research such as qualitative, quantitative or mixed one. Each methodology has its strengths and weaknesses. Depending on aims and aspects of research we can choose appropriate methodology to gain reliable and valid findings. I tend to use qualitative methodology because it is suitable for my small sample, research purposes, and it can help me to collect information in depth and in detail that quantitative methodology is difficult to gain. Through qualitative methodology, I can explore the actual facts existing in the classroom; observe students' performance, behaviour; and capture students' attitudes, reactions, and opinions about the innovation. These are trustworthy evidences to see if my innovation is beneficial and successful or not.

Qualitative methodology is kind of formative one that comprises specialized techniques for getting in-depth responses about how people feel and what they think. Qualitative researchers collect what they see, hear, read from people, places, and activities, with the aim to discover the community and create new understanding that can be used by the social world. Savenye and Robinson (2005) indicates that qualitative study is implemented in natural setting that gives researcher a deep understanding on human points of view and activities from participants' perspectives. If researchers use skilfully logical different methods of data collection, obtained data can be maximized the reliability, validity and provide contextual aspect of human responses rather than measurable and objective one. Though study sample may be small, it is represented in great detail to obtain insights related to participants and research setting. Therefore research issue can be examined thoroughly through this methodology. However, the quality of qualitative study much relies on researcher's personal skills and it is easily affected by subjective biases (Anderson 2010)

According to Dahlberge and McCaig (2010, p. 112) "Action researchers are well placed to conduct qualitative methodology as they often have ready access to research participants in their local contexts". Action research is a process of systematic inquiry which pursues innovation in specific contexts that researcher thinks important (Hinchey 2008). A basic action research model comprises planning a change; acting and observing the process and outcomes of the change; reflecting on these processes and outcomes; and then further planning. Action research is a useful and powerful model for practitioner research because it can be set in a practical context; aims and researcher are from inside rather than outside (Koshy 2005). It involves continuous evaluation and the research can lead to open-ended results. Burn (2010) also sees that action research as means of 'empowering' teachers and enabling them to obtain deeper insights and understanding of their practices through a systematic approach that brings together classrooms action, research and reflection. Therefore, I find that action research is highly suitable to my research aims. It helps me find positive changes and improvements for my practical teaching and my students' learning.

V.   METHODS

In my research, I decide to use observation, questionnaire and semi-structured interview to collect data to answer the research question. Questionnaire helps me to collect information from all the participants. The other methods provide me more trustworthy data through detailed observation and interaction with the study subjects.

Observation

Observation is one of the chief methods employed by many researchers in qualitative researches. It is way of gathering data by observing events, peoples' behaviours and interactions in their natural context (Savenye & Robinson 2005). The main advantage of observation is it brings direct approach to the social phenomenon under consideration; it allows us directly see what people do rather than relying on what people say they did in a certain setting. Therefore, I choose this method because I can see directly my students' performance, engagement, interaction and collaboration when they participate in group work activities in the classroom. Those are valuable evidences help me to answer the research question. Through class observation, I also find out positive points and negative points of each lesson as well as my own teaching so that I can explore how effective is my teaching using group work for enhancing students' oral skills.

Questionnaire

Dornyei (2003) states that questionnaire is one of the most popular methods to gather a large amount of information from participants with less time-consuming. Hence, questionnaire is a good method that enables me to collect opinions, experiences, reactions and attitudes from all thirty students in the classroom after they take the lessons with group work activities. The obtained data from questionnaire will be more objective because respondents feel comfortable to answer the questions and they are not influenced by researcher's own opinions. Thus, this method can lessen bias and increase reliability and validity of the research results. However, to maximize the effectiveness of questionnaire, researcher should make well-designed questions. They must be easily understood by respondents with simple words. Hinchey (2008, p.83) notes that "the shorter questionnaire is, the more likely it is to be accomplished".

In my research, I will make a questionnaire including ten closed-ended questions with Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The questions will cover all the purposes of using group work so that I can collect useful data from my students to address the research question.

Semi-structured interview

According to Savenye and Robinson (2005, p.78), "interviews is an interactive, verbal method which are forms of conversation" that researcher uses for collecting data to address research questions. This method allows researcher to explore further participants' preferences, opinions or behaviour. Semi-structured interview is organized around predetermined open-ended questions, but interviewees have time and chance to express more their points of view on the relative issues (Hinchey 2008; Dicicco-Bloom & Crabtree 2006). In dialogue between interviewer and interviewee, other questions can be raised to deeply investigate respondents' perceptions; complex questions or vague words will be also made clear. Thus, this method will help me intensively probe my students' opinions, preferences, and advantages of group work activities applied in the classroom. Nonetheless, in my study the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee may affect the research outcome; the data may not be reliable because students tend to please their teacher. To minimize this weakness, the interview questions should be carefully crafted that apply specifically to my research topic and relate to my research question. I use five open-ended questions.

VI.   DATA COLLECTION

After getting agreement from the dean and consent forms from thirty students, I begin to implement the research and collect data. I will conduct my innovation within seven weeks with five lessons. Class observation will be implemented on week 3, week 5 and week 7. I have my class observed on alternate weeks because I want to see what degree of change and improvement when I implement my innovation via lessons. Moreover, after each observation, I can find good points and bad points which help me reinforce to conduct next lessons more effectively. To observe class carefully and gathered data is more objective, I invite a colleague to observe my class. She will note down what she sees, hears and finds on the observation form. To capture the students' opinions, attitudes toward different group work activities, explore their advantages from students' perception as well as their reaction on the innovation, questionnaire will be implemented immediately after each lesson is observed. Through questionnaires I can also explore my innovation brings what advantages to students' learning from their perceptions. I will deliver the questionnaires to thirty students. It takes about ten minutes to complete and I will collect them before I leave the classroom.

Semi-structure interview will be carried out on the final week to gather richer and informative responses from students after taking seven lessons with group work activities. I randomly choose five students in the class and have face-to-face interviews individually with them in group learning room at the university library. All the interviews are conducted in Vietnamese so that students can express themselves fully and clearly. Each interview lasts about 20 minutes. It is not possible to take notes all said during an interview, so I tend to tape-record interviews. Tape-recording also enable me fully attend to the context of interview. The gathered information from observation, questionnaire and interview will be stored carefully for data analysis next week of the research.

VII.   DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis is the next essential process to analyze and synthesize the gathered data and to generate a cohesive, systematic interpretation to answer our research questions or examine the validity of our hypothesis (Burns 2010). In my study, the collected data from questionnaire, observation and interview will be analysed and discussed in turn to provide a basic for determining whether the changes to my teaching effectively improve practice and address my problem.

I tend to use thematic analysis for the collected qualitative data. It is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting within the data set relevant to the research question. Braun and Clarke (2006) states that thematic analysis is a foundation method for qualitative data. I will analyze data in several steps. Foremost, I familiarize with the data

by transcribing and translating tape-recordings, reading carefully the notes of observation forms, the questionnaire responses, the interview transcripts a few times to compare and contrast the points within them and noting down initial ideas. Secondly, I generate initial codes which identify interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion. After coding, I seek for themes by assorting the different codes to potential themes and collecting relevant data into the identified themes. Then, it is necessary to refine the themes and give them concise names. Finally, when I get a set of themes, I make the final analysis and write-up of the report with some selected extracts for illustration. The analytic narrative should go beyond description of the data, and make in-depth discussion related to my research question.

VIII.   ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

Ethical issues are necessary and important in any kind of research. According to Eisenhauer, Orb, and Wynaden (2001, p. 93), ethics refers to "doing good and avoiding harm". Hence, it is responsible for every researcher to protect their participants and lessening or preventing harm by implementing the suitable ethical principles. Koshy (2005) indicates that it is particularly important for action researchers to consider ethical issues because of the small-scale nature of the researches within the researchers' working contexts. In my study, I choose qualitative methodology, action research, and data is collected through class observation, questionnaire and semi-structured interview method. Correspondingly, it is essential to consider the potential ethical issues in my research including informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, autonomy, and beneficence to protect the participants from unexpected effects.

Fouka and Mantzorou (2011) point out that confidentiality and anonymity is closely relevant to respect for the dignity and fidelity. Making data 'anonymous' means that participants' names and some other personal information are detached from the data to protect their identity. In my study, students will be asked to share their opinions, experiences and behaviours about using group working activities and their advantages through questionnaire and interview. The students may feel anxious for giving negative comments. Therefore, their names are not asked to write on the questionnaires in order that they feel relaxed to honestly answer all questions. In interviews, students may cope with embarrassment and tension when answering my questions. Thus, open and friendly conversations are necessary to enable them to express more fully and freely their thoughts, viewpoints, and comments. Nonetheless, students can reject to answer any question if they feel uncomfortable in any way in interview. Moreover, I need to let them know that their identity information and obtained data will be kept confidential. I respect all the participants' responses.

According to Fouka and Manzorou (2011, p. 4), "informed consent is the major ethical issue in conducting research". Autonomy means that participants have rights to voluntarily agree or disagree to participate in the research. They are made aware that they can withdraw their participation at any time without giving any reason; even they have signed a consent form. I will ask for permission from the dean and then deliver the consent forms to thirty students. In addition, I need to make the participants clear that the research findings will benefit all of them and my teaching as well. My research will conform to the ethical principles in qualitative research to make the best results.

IX.   LIMITATION

Despite of considering the potential problems before conducting the research, there are several limitations in my research. Firstly, the sample size is small. The participants include thirty freshmen of one class.. Therefore, the findings may not represent all freshmen at Dong Nai Technology University in particular or other universities in general. Accordingly, the research results should be generalized carefully to other cases. Secondly, the duration for implementing the research is quite short, the reliability and validity of the results are possibly affected. Finally, several meaningful or untouched issues may be omitted or not be investigated during conducting the research.
In general, the shortcomings are unavoidable. I believe that if I have longer duration for the research and conduct on different classes with larger participants, the research outcomes will be more reliable and valid.

X.   CONCLUSION

Developing students' speaking ability is one of the main aims of English teaching in Vietnam nowadays. So, teachers must take much attention to make real communicative situations for students who are learning English in a non-native English country. Group work is one of classroom activities in communicative language teaching. It advances students' linguistic competence; create more chances for students to use language. Therefore, I want to conduct this research to innovate my teaching by using group work effectively with hope to improve students' oral skills, expose students to real-life situations for language use, develop their collaborative learning and create active learning environment through group work activities. The research results are beneficial to my teaching, my students in improving their communicative ability, and useful for my colleagues in the university. Obviously, other teachers who want to change their traditional teaching method should consider applying communicative activities in classrooms. This section is for concluding the proposal information rather than assuming the results of the research. Results and finding will be reported in the next unit. To attain the aim, the researcher has to follow seriously the chosen methods to collect data needed and then data collected and analysed presents a completed picture of utilizing group work in EFL class.

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