Large Classes and Second Language Instruction

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Abstract

Traditional approaches to language teaching are teacher and subject centred. They prescribe what the teacher should do in language classes. Little mention is made about what the learners should do. Nevertheless, it is indisputably accepted that only what the learners themselves do in a meaningful manner makes them learn. Communicative approaches, of which group method techniques are an off-shoot, aim at maximum learner involvement and a simultaneous cut in teacher talk-time. Group work in English language instruction is based on the assumption that contribution to the classroom situation does not always come from the figure at the front; students learn as much from their peers as they do from their teachers. This paper attempts to discuss advantages of group work in language instruction.

Introduction

Different kinds of approaches to second language learning, varying in degrees of sophistication, are galore. Some of them are long-established and conservative and some others quite recent and adaptive. A feature common to all these approaches is that they tell us about *what the teacher does in the class and nothing or little about what the teacher achieves*. It is an accepted fact that the degree of success of teaching depends on the amount and nature of participation on the part of the learners. The more learner-centred the teaching is, the better will be the outcome.

However, the colossal size of present day classes, which is a universal phenomenon, makes this task almost an impossibility. The teacher's energy is spent mostly in controlling the class or assessing pupils' written work. There hardly seems to be any scope for individualisation of instruction. It is at this juncture, when the inordinately large class proves to be a prohibitive factor in attainment of goals set in a second language instruction class, that group work comes to the rescue of the teacher.

Group Work : The Rationale

This technique is based on the assumption that *contribution to the classroom situation does not always come from the figure at the front.* Students learn as much from their peers as they do from their teachers.

Every second language teacher feels the necessity to increase the amount of student talk-time. The number of teaching sessions for a second language can hardly be increased without affecting the other school subjects. Hence it appears that the only way to achieve more student talk-time is through a simultaneous cut in teacher

talk-time and an instruction of activities and tasks where as many students as possible can speak at the same time.

Group work can provide for this.

Dividing the large class into smaller groups and assigning them various tasks is the gist of the group work technique. The teacher here is not the instructor, but a facilitator. Groups carry out the activities and tasks assigned to them while the teacher moves from group to group supervising them, extending a helping hand if needed, rectifying the students' mistakes only if a group meets a dead end or seems to move in a completely wrong direction.

This technique is based on the following six assumptions.

(i) Language is a social affair.

If language is to function as a means of communication in society, language teaching must be done in a corresssponding fashion. The present *modus operandi* of teaching language through lecturing nullifies this objective.

Language use is manifested in the form of various functions like requesting, making inquiries, offering suggestions, apologising, thanksgiving, explaining, arguing, agreeing or disagreeing, offering help etc. The instructor's responsibility is to create a need to perform these functions in the classroom and provide opportunities to the prospective users of the language to employ it in a socially acceptable form. This can be achieved by employing materials based on principles involved in communicative methodology, viz. information gap, exchange of knowledge, ambiguity, open endedness, problem-solving etc.

The learners should be provided opportunities to play roles of various types, in various situations--the ones that they would be required to play in life outside school. Thus, the classroom should function as a rehearsing ground for efficient use of language in real life. Incidentally, the learners develop not only linguistic competence (grammatical accuracy) but also sociolinguistic competence (acceptability and intelligibility).

(ii) Man is gregarious by nature.

If language is a social phenomenon, the members of the society who employ it are bound to be social beings. Most people enjoy working together. Group work provides opportunities for such co-operative work. Listening to lectures seems to be boring, whereas time seems to fleet by in group endeavours.

(iii) Though a social being, man cannot relate to more than four or five persons at a time.

After a lecture, if the class is allowed to discuss its problems on its own, it can result in lack of order and confusion, but in groups of five or six members each, disorder is reduced to a great extent for there are four or five listeners to every speaker. The speaker can maintain eye contact with his peers and verify if they are "with him". The shy become less shy and dare to contribute in these smaller groups.

(iv) What is learnt through involvement, proper understanding without mechanical efforts, is retained longer.

Apart from the overt learning--through carrying out tasks, entering into conversations etc.-- there is the covert learning--internalising of rich language input. Not all the how's and why's of the language are presented through clear-cut, well-worded grammatical rules. Much is left to be inferred by the learners. For instance, learners must get a thorough understanding of social contexts for various sociolinguistic formulae. Apart from the particular language item being practised, and the instructions given by the teacher, there is a lot of other supportive talk in group sessions, e.g. explaining a difficult point, repeating, chiding, maintaining discipline within the group etc. In such a rich intake climate, language items previously learnt also get consolidated without conscious effort.

(v) The participation of learners in the planning of their learning activities can yield better results.

Group work demands co-operative efforts at all stages--planning, execution and follow up work. The co-operation is both between the instructor

and the groups in the class and within groups. When learners are made responsible for their own learning by being actively involved in preparation of materials, e.g. charts, maps, collection of realia etc., and management of these materials during the session, they learn to be responsible for their work. Again, this responsibility is widely distributed which has a valuable mellowing effect on the students.

(vi) The teacher is not the only source of learning.

Students learn more often from their peers than from the teacher alone. Moreover, group work opens avenues for use of materials from various fields, catering to the varied interests of the members in the class. For instance, in a task which requires the members to talk about their hobbies, the participants, including the instructor, may learn a few things about an uncommon hobby. Thus, the instructor, at best remains one of the contributors or just a supervisor but never the sole provider of information or knowledge.

This, in the long run, teaches the learners not to depend too much upon any outside help. The weaning process is less torturous.

Group Work : Advantages

Group work tried out at various levels of linguistic attainment and with varied age groups has proved its efficiency through several advantages.

Language generated in group work sessions is genuine and not mere reproduction of prefabricated sentences provided by the instructor, the text book or other sources. A corollary of this is that since the students are able to employ language for real life communication this success instils confidence in them. It also provides the satisfaction in that the language they are learning is a useful tool for social interaction and transaction in real life and not a mere school subject full of grammar rules and comprehension exercises. Thus, learners are intrinsically motivated.

Their opportunities for genuine communication are also increased. Through group sessions,

maximum class time is utilised. Each learner gets practice in language use. Moreover, even the weaker learners get an audience that leads to a sense of recognition. This, in turn, helps them improve their self-image.

In a large lecture group, only a few daring, confident ones interact with the teacher, the majority of students remain silent. They are unwilling to talk for fear of making mistakes. In smaller groups of five or six members, learners feel less diffident for there are fewer members to listen to their mistakes. Their errors might not even be noticed. This provides them enough boost to muster courage to interact which, in the long run, helps them become confident users of the language.

Since the groups are made responsible for their own conduct, there are fewer problems of discipline and administration. Approval by members of the group is a highly motivating factor, learners seek their peers' approval more than their teachers'. Therefore, groups impose their own discipline.

A group work session is also self-administering. Once the tasks have been properly explained and clear instructions provided, the teacher rarely needs to worry about keeping order. Hence they can devote their energies and time to helping those who need it most.

Furthermore, mixed ability groups provide opportunities for the less able to be helped by the able and for the able to develop qualities of leadership, thus benefitting both.

Co-operative effort required in group work can also reduce intra class antagonisms. Increased interaction in a stress-free climate enables a clearer understanding of the topic or problem on hand and provides better opportunities for revising and catching up on missed work.

Consequently, the quality of work produced in groups is usually higher than that produced individually. Before it is finalised, the write up of any sort is scrutinised by all the members of the group. This redundancy of effort reduces errors.

Conclusion

Students will have a much greater opportunity to employ the new language during their sessions if the teacher introduces group work. In such a class, participants learn to take turns and become better listeners and better speakers. The talkative participants realise that they do not always come first and the docile participants' talents are also recognised.

Instead of individuals competing with one another, groups vie to complete a task. The formal class encourages passivity for the learners perceive themselves as an audience. This, is turn, encourages passive taking in rather than active involvement in problem solving and discovery-- processes essential towards the development of cognitive skills.

Apart from its contribution to the learning process, group work sessions are a welcome change from school routine. Since teachers are not looked at as the sole solution, given there is a shift of emphasis so far as the commending position of the teacher is concerned, they are viewed more as facilitators of learning rather than as awe-inspiring figures.

The Author

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