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Grouping Students for Successful Communication in the EFL Classroom

Deborah REES

(Department of English Language Education)

ABSTRACT: There has been much written and said about the reluctance of Japanese students to speak English in class and many explanations have been offered for this behaviour. Whatever the reasons, if students are to become confident English speakers, they must overcome this reticence and take advantage of communicative opportunities presented to them.

This paper reports on one possible approach in supporting Japanese students communicatively in the EFL classroom. It describes small group activities which force learners to speak in English. These activities are carried out in an environment which the learners themselves perceive to be safe and supportive, where they can make mistakes with a small audience of their peers without fear of embarrassment. In undertaking these tasks, students have stated they have gained confidence in their ability to speak in English, they have noted an improvement in their English language proficiency and their desire to learn English has increased.

KEY WORDS: Group work, Communicative language teaching, Japanese students

1. Introduction

In this paper, I will describe some specific ways I have structured pairs and groups in my English language classes at Nara University of Education. The techniques have had the specific aim of forcing contributions from all members of each pair or group in order to ensure active participation by all the students in my classes. I believe that this more structured approach to group work has supported the students’ development of more effective skills in spoken English.

Before describing these grouping techniques, I will briefly outline my experience in and understandings of teaching Japanese college students and my teaching context at Nara University of Education. As well, I will briefly present my views on successful oral communication in the classroom and explore the usefulness of small group work in this context.
2. Japanese college students and learning English

Prior to coming to Japan, I had had no previous experience in teaching Japanese college students in a foreign language context, although I had had 16 years working as an ESL teacher, teacher trainer and curriculum writer in the South Australian Education Department. I was therefore uncertain as to what to expect from students in terms of their level of proficiency and their confidence in speaking in English. I had heard and read that Japanese students were reluctant to speak, particularly in front of a large group and since being in Japan, I have certainly experienced this reluctance from many students.

I had also gained the impression prior to coming to Japan and also after talking to students in my classes, that most students' previous experiences of learning English had focused largely on reading, writing, and grammar and that they had had few opportunities to talk in English. This would certainly contribute to their lack of confidence in speaking in English.

I found in the first few weeks of my contract that students were not prepared to ask and answer questions on their own initiative and seemed embarrassed to speak in front of a whole group. In small groups they would not speak either, often seemingly not motivated to talk, not knowing how to talk in the group and unsure of what their role was in the group.

3. My teaching context at Nara University of Education

The classes I have taught have varied in size from over thirty students to small classes of ten. Within each class, there has been a range of levels of oral language proficiency in English. Many students have studied English for eight to ten years but at the beginning of the academic year were only able to communicate in English at a basic beginner's level. Others were more proficient, some having attended private language classes as well as studying English at school and others having studied in English speaking countries for various lengths of time. Some students, particularly those who have studied in English speaking countries, had experienced different teaching methods such as pair and group work activities. Generally however, students at the beginning of the year were unfamiliar with working in pairs or small groups and were particularly unfamiliar with small group tasks which forced contributions from all members of the group.

4. Successful communication in the language classroom

I believe that classroom activities and classroom interaction need to reflect as much as possible the way language is used outside the classroom. In reality, in successful oral interactions, a purpose exists for communicating and the speaker is motivated to get the message across successfully. There is also a listener or audience who is attentive in wanting to receive and respond to the message. In other words successful interaction requires motivation and cooperation by those involved in the process.

Of course when communicating in Japanese, Japanese students are highly successful communicators, motivated and cooperative. In the English language classroom, I would argue
that most learners want to communicate in English but other factors seem to come into play which prevent them from participating in a way that will support their language learning.

Given that students are reluctant to participate for whatever reason, the classroom needs to be supportive of their attempts so that a student will develop confidence to take risks. One important way of providing a supportive language learning classroom for Japanese students is to use small group work where students can try out language with a small number of their peers and not feel embarrassed or self conscious at their efforts in front of the whole class.

5. Small group work in the language classroom.

Many text books simply suggest getting into small groups for discussion of an issue or topic or to complete some aspect of a task. They do not stipulate how students should work in groups. Often this means that the students do not talk and work individually within the group on a task, or at best, one student does the bulk of the work while the others listen.

My question is then; how can teachers organize groups to ensure that they are effective in getting all students to talk in language classrooms?

I believe that for many Japanese students, having more structured and explicit roles in groups or having activities which force interaction in a supportive context is necessary to build students’ confidence in speaking. By this I mean that each student in each group or pair should have particular information to gain or to impart in order for the group or pair to complete the task successfully.

This more structured approach to group work requires students to be active participants as members of a group, but it gives them appropriate support in terms of the language they are expected to use and the environment in which they are operating. However it still allows for learners to be adventurous in their use of language and provides opportunities for learners to negotiate meaning at whatever level of proficiency they are at. Thus this approach is supportive of a wide range of learners and is successful in classes where there is a range of abilities.

6. Some ideas for setting up small groups.

In my particular context, I decided to implement this more structured approach to small group work with all my classes. The following are a selection of the strategies I have used to try and involve students as more active participants in the language learning process.

6.1 Information gap activities

Information gap activities can be defined as any activity where participants in pairs or small groups have different information from each other and where they have to share this information in order for the task to be completed successfully. Information gap activities can be either one way or two way. One way information gap means that one person has all the information and imparts this information to another person. The person without the information can ask questions to obtain the information. Two way information gap means
that both participants have some information and need to obtain information from their respective partner. In my experience, I have found two way information gap activities to encourage more interaction and more negotiation of meaning and have consequently used them more frequently.

Whether one way or two way, information gap activities can range from very structured where the amount of information to be shared is carefully limited and particular language structures are practiced, to more open ended examples which allow participants more opportunities to negotiate meaning and to use language more freely and spontaneously. The kinds of information gap tasks used, developed or adapted will depend on the level of the learners and their confidence as speakers of English. With general English classes for first and second year students, I have used fairly structured tasks where the students have opportunities to use the introduced structures and vocabulary but at the same time are able to use other language within their linguistic repertoire.

It is important when using information gap tasks to ensure that your students are familiar with most of the language the task aims to elicit. Different tasks produce different language items and structures eg a sequence of pictures to make a story will encourage students to describe what is happening in each picture, whereas two pictures with a number of small differences between them will often elicit language which describes where things are in the pictures and will therefore focus largely on prepositions.

I began with pair activities which were reasonably structured such as finding the differences between two pictures, and then moved onto more open ended small group tasks such as sequencing the pictures of a story. In such a task, each member of the group had one of the pictures of the story and together without showing their pictures, the group had to work out the sequence of the story. The chosen activities fitted within a theme or topic being studied in class at the time.

6.1.1 Advantages of information gap activities
These activities force all members of the group to contribute, but because the task is in pairs or small groups, they are contributing in a supportive environment, where they feel confident to take risks and attempt to use a variety of utterances to get their meaning across. Many of these activities seem like games to the participants so they are often more motivated to complete the task for this reason. In a highly structured example, the introduced language is repeated often which provides excellent practice of the structures without seeming artificial. Even the most structured information gap still provides opportunities for negotiation of meaning. So participants learn valuable authentic language they need in everyday interactions such as “I’m sorry, I didn’t understand. Can you repeat that please?” and “What do you mean?” These activities also provide valuable and authentic practice in listening since they require students to listen for particular information to achieve the task.
6.2 Triads

The Triads activity involves the following process:
Divide the class into groups of three arranged in a circle around the classroom. (This might involve moving a few tables and chairs but it’s worth it!) Assign an A, B or C to each group. The A in each group talks to B and C on a given topic (usually an uncompleted statement) for about a minute. (The time can vary depending on the level of the learners). B and C can ask clarifying questions of A or support A by giving their input to the topic being spoken about. However it is important that A does the bulk of the talking. Then Bs talk on a given topic for one minute and then Cs. When all three have spoken on a given topic for one minute each, ask A to move clockwise to the next triad, Bs stay where they are and Cs move anti-clockwise. Again As, Bs and Cs talk for a minute, and again they move as explained above. This process can be repeated several times.

Following are two sets of topic starters I have used; the first set with a first year English class as part of a topic on “Shopping” and the second with third year Current English class.

First set of topic starters:
- I like shopping or I don’t like shopping because........
- My favourite Japanese foods are....
- I like or I don’t like “Western” foods because....
- My favourite place to eat out is .... because....
- I think “Western” restaurants are ....
- If I had to shop for a party, I would buy....
- I like buying clothes at.... because....
- If I could go to another country to shop, I would go to .... because

Second set of topic starters:
- In my opinion, the most important issue facing the world is....
- In my opinion the most important issue facing Japan is....
- I read newspapers or I don’t read newspapers because....
- A topic I like to read about is....
- Some topics I’m interested in finding out more about are....
- In my opinion some good things about the Japanese education system are....
- In my opinion some worrying things about the Japanese education system are....
- In terms of the environment, the most critical problem are....
- Some things that are good about living in Japan are....

This activity can be used as a warm up or as a review activity to provide students with an opportunity to practice some of the language introduced in the topic, and with more advanced students, as a way of introducing a topic to find out their ideas and opinions on particular issues.
I have generally found that students love this activity. It provides them with an opportunity to talk with many of their class members in a supportive environment where they feel free to make mistakes. As students have got used to it, they have made it more interactive by responding to and asking questions of the speaker. The activity encourages authentic dialogue where learners have to rely on their ability to speak spontaneously as well as to listen carefully to other speakers and to respond appropriately, often a situation they find themselves in with native speakers of English.

6.3 The "Onion" procedure
This procedure is described in Klippel (1984:9). The basic procedure involves two equal groups. There is a double circle of chairs arranged to face each other and the number matches the number of students in the group. Thus the students in the inner circle face the students in the outer circle and after a few minutes of discussing a topic, the students in the outer circle move onto the next chair to face a new partner.

I have adapted this procedure to ensure that all students are required to discuss a topic. Students in the outer circle are As and students in the inner circle are Bs. As are given a topic to discuss and then Bs are given another topic to discuss before students move to meet their new partners. I also have students standing rather than using chairs.

This procedure has the same advantages as the Triads activity in that it allows students to get to know different class members and encourages spontaneous discussion and purposeful listening. Students feel very comfortable expressing their ideas in this situation as they are not the focus of attention and are sharing their ideas with one other person. Again this procedure can be used as a warm up activity, an activity to elicit opinions or as an activity to review particular content and language.

6.4 Interviewing and surveying
I find interviewing and surveying and sharing the results of interviews and surveys very useful strategies for encouraging oral fluency in the classroom. Dale Fuller's Crossroads: Communication Activities For Today (1992) has been particularly useful in helping me develop procedures for interviewing and surveying in the classroom. The technique of working in pairs initially and asking each other questions, then either changing partners or joining together to make a group of four to share the results of the interviews is a simple yet effective way of ensuring that all class members have an opportunity to talk for an extended time in a meaningful way. Reporting information in the second pair or to the small group allows for practice of the language introduced in the initial interview, but is genuinely communicative as each person is reporting information that is new to the listener.

6.5 "Find someone who...."
Although this is considered by many to be an over-used strategy in the language classroom, I still find it a useful warm up activity. It’s advantages are that it can be used with beginning
speakers of English as it usually provides the basic language structures within the task, which students can then use to obtain the information required. As well, it does force students to speak as they are expected to obtain a small amount of information from a number of other learners, again encouraging them to get to know other class members and leading to class cohesion.

6.6 “Find your partner”
Rather than just asking learners to work with the person or persons next to them, I often use grouping procedures which forces learners to move round the room and ask questions until they find their partner or partners. This process has several benefits including encouraging learners to mix and work with other members of the class thereby building up relationships in the class as well as providing opportunities to practice new language items.

Each class member is given a small card with some item of language written on it and they are required to find the other item or items that go with it. The aspect of language being practised is given to the learners so they have a framework in which to find their partner. Many different aspects of language can be practiced in this way including idioms and proverbs, opposites, words and their definitions, synonyms, collective nouns, adjectives of similar meaning, word sets, mini dialogues and so on.

6.7 Dividing then re-dividing
Another grouping procedure I have found effective is to divide the class into groups of 4 initially, each group consisting of an A, B, C and D. Then re-dividing into groups where all the As are together, all the Bs are together and so on. I have used this technique when reading newspaper articles with a more advanced class, where each group began with a different article to read and discuss, and then had to regroup and tell about the main ideas in their article to their new group. This is effective in encouraging students to read for meaning, to identify the main ideas and to report to others in a meaningful way the content of an article others have not read.

7. Conclusion
The selection of grouping activities I have outlined are those I consider to be the most effective I have used this year with my English language classes at Nara University of Education. I have found that, although I have developed my own materials to ensure effective learner participation, it is often quite a simple task to adapt existing materials and activities so that grouping techniques which force contributions by all learners can be used.

I believe this more structured approach to pair and group work is one way to build up the confidence and fluency of Japanese learners and to encourage participation and risk taking, particularly in large classes. Once the students are more confident users of the target language, then less structured approaches to group work can be employed with more success. I would like to conclude this paper with some comments from students, which I believe are
testament to the effectiveness of the activities and techniques I have described.

S1: I think these activities are very good. Thanks to them we have opportunities to talk in English. I don’t have to be anxious because we talk in small groups, not in front of a big audience. In these classes we not only listen but do. All of us can join in, enjoy and improve our English skills. Thanks to these classes, I like English much better. I want to talk with people all over the world. Before I was scared to talk with them.

S2: I like these activities very much because I have to speak in English. Before I entered this university, I hardly had any opportunities to explain my opinion in English. All I had to do was to learn much grammar and many words.

S3: I think this class is very enjoyable. I didn’t like speaking in English the first time. But, many activities in class made me enjoy English. Now I like English very much. I want to do more speaking practice and be a good English speaker.

S4: I really enjoy the small group activities. They give me a chance to speak in English which is what I want to do. The most interesting and difficult activity is Triads because I must think quickly and talk for one minute. The most fun activity is to find differences between two pictures.

S5: I like this class. Especially I like to share with my partners in English. I was passive before I came to this class, but now I am active.

S6: I like small group activities because it is fun to talk together. I hate it when only the teacher talks and the students just listen to him or her. Small group activities give me lots of chances to speak in English. I hadn’t experienced this style of class before, so I enjoyed joining this English class very much.

S7: Small groups are a good way for us to try to speak in English. Speaking in small groups doesn’t make us so nervous about speaking English. My English has improved in this class.

S8: I like small group activities. I think it is a very good way to learn English, especially talking in English because Japanese are very shy. I know it is important to speak English in public but we aren’t used to doing it. In small groups, we have a chance to talk with others and share ideas in English without getting embarrassed. I think it is the best way to learn to talk in English.

REFERENCES


USEFUL RESOURCES