The Use of Group Work to Improve Chinese University Students' English Speaking Ability

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Abstract. For many years, Chinese University students have spoken with “dumb English.” However, with the need for effective English oral communication it is increasingly important in China to find some communicative methods to develop students’ speaking ability within the classroom at Chinese University level. Group work as a communicative language teaching technique, not only increases students’ speaking opportunities, but also develops their interactive ability within the EFL classroom. Therefore, this paper aims to discuss some useful ways of using group work to improve Chinese University students’ English speaking ability.

Introduction

It is agreed that the goal of English language teaching is to develop students’ ability to communicate effectively in English [1]. However, how to promote students’ speaking ability within the classroom is a crucial issue in the Chinese EFL context. Due to the limited access to English outside of the classroom, the quantity and quality of students’ participation in discourse within the classroom becomes significant for the development of their speaking ability. It is said that group work is suitable for language teaching in China as students value co-operation, self-effacement and collectivism [2], meaning that students would work cooperatively in the classroom. It not only develops students’ willingness to speaking English, but also increases their language use. However, due to the large class sizes, teachers tend to dominate class talk in order to avoid the difficulties of managing group work. Hence, effective group work as well as the implementation of group work in the language classes deserve more attention.

Speaking Ability

Speaking is a complicate skill, including the knowledge and the skills with which to activate the knowledge [3]. It is more than just to construct grammatical correct sentences and then utter them. According to Bygate [4], he has made a clear distinction between the knowledge and the skills, which is crucial in teaching speaking; the knowledge refers to grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary, while the skills refers to the ability to use them. Hence, the speaking ability means the ability to use speaking knowledge effectively when communicating in my understanding.

Speaking Ability and Chinese University EFL Students

Chinese students have featured with “dumb English” for many years [5]. It is particular evident in Chinese University students who have learned English for a long time but still found difficult to communicate with foreigners after graduation. Bearing this in mind, it is necessary to learn about the ELT at Chinese tertiary level. English is a compulsory course for every college student; it is usually be taught in a large class size, more than 50 students per class, taking my teaching university as an example. Large-class sized English teaching has already become an unchangeable fact at the Chinese Universities. It makes English teachers to follow a teacher-fronted and lecture like teaching method which primarily consists of explaining reading text, illustrating vocabulary,
instructing grammar, and conducting drilling practices [6]. Thus, students learn English through passive receiving English knowledge rather than actual using English.

However, with the need for the development of communicative skills, speaking ability becomes a compelling target in Chinese College English teaching [7], it is necessary to find out ways to promote students’ speaking ability within English classrooms. As Nunan ed. [8] suggested, learners can make progress, as the interaction makes the learner more involved in the negotiation of meaning. It indicates that speaking ability needs to be developed by communicating the language through interaction. Hence, group work is a well-known practice in EFL the classroom, which might be a good method for doing this as it results in the increased speaking opportunities for individual students [9]. Many details on group work will be introduced in the following sections.

**Group Work**

With the large class sizes in Chinese universities, group work might refer to several students working on meaningful communicative tasks which involve information negotiation and information sharing to achieve particular teaching aims. Hence, group work appears to be a useful tool in language classrooms with which to encourage real communication and progress speaking ability. However, the effect of group work on language learning deserves to be looked at more closely in the following sections for the purpose of its later implementation of group work.

**The Quantity of Learner’s Participation in the Classroom**

To be specific, group work increases the quantity of learners’ participation in practicing the target language in the L2 classroom [9]. However, in contrast to a large quantity of mechanical drills which are deliberately used to practice second language offers little value of L2 acquisition [10], group work involves with interactive repetitions in conversation promote acquisition [11]. As DiCamilla and Anton [12] investigated, the amount of language input or of comprehensible input are increased as learners in days repeated each other’s words or phrases when collaboratively composing a piece of work, which is a form of receiving and contributing to each other’s learning. Hence, with a greater quantity of interactive repetition in the classroom, student’s oral fluency might be improved.

**The Learner’s Quality Participation in the Classroom**

Group work also enhances the quality of learners’ participation in the classroom which is hypothesized to promote acquisition, as more opportunities to produce a varied language use by initiating talk, asking for clarification, and taking-turns [13]. What is matter here is in contrast to the teacher-student interaction in the classroom where students’ interaction behaviors are just responding to the teacher’s questions or initiating a question to the teacher, interaction between students makes them not only interacting, but also negotiating for meaning by clarifying the meaning, modifying, repeating [14]. Besides, students can go beyond sentence-level by uttering more cohesive and coherent discourse and practicing their turn-taking skills in group work interaction [15]. By considering those factors mentioned before, the improvement of speaking ability can be developed in the way of managing interaction.

**Key Management Issues of Using Group Work Task**

The effect of group work on foreign language learning is influenced by the many aspects involved in constructing group work, such as the choice of task, learners’ variables (for example their proficiency level) and the relationship between group members.

In terms of the choice of task, it is considered that tasks which provide interaction conditions within the groups would more effective in facilitating language acquisition compared to a task with little or no interaction [13]. At the same time, tasks which have two-way interaction enjoy more negotiation than those of one-way interaction [16]. For example, problem-solving tasks which have limited solutions might promote more interaction. However, whatever the task is, it should match students’ proficiency level. It is particularly crucial for developing students’ speaking engagement.
As for student variables, elements such as proficiency level, gender, personality and age need to be considered when doing group work [17]. These aspects might influence the quality of students’ talk [13]. However, as Varonis and Gass [18] suggests the more differences there are between students, the more possibility there is to negotiate meaning. Amongst these variables, proficiency level seems one obvious factor as classrooms generally enjoy a mixed proficiency level. Some studies have suggested that mixed proficiency interaction may promote language acquisition as such groupings have more negotiation in the target language than a grouping where students are of a similar proficiency level grouping [19]. According to Ellis [13] suggests that in order to ensure the success of a mixed pairing, the less advanced learners need to take charge of the information to be exchanged. Although these studies are conducted on pairings, it deserves to be noted when considering a mixed level proficiency groups.

In addition, the relationships between group members should also be considered when forming groups. It might be particularly significant for Asian students because they value the importance of the affective relationship between group members when doing group work [20]. However, grouping students by friendship needs teachers to conduct accurate classroom observations, which is not easy for teachers to learn about every student’s interpersonal relationship, given the large-sized classes.

The Implementation of Group Work

At different stages, teachers need to deal with different matters in order to ensure a successful group work task. At the beginning stage, giving clear and meaningful instructions would save time and increase the effectiveness of the task [21]. Meanwhile, giving a set time for students to complete the task is also crucial for the success of group work, as students have a framework to apply within [22]. During this stage, teachers need to monitor learners and avoid the temptation of providing lexical and grammatical help but should keep notes for their later use. Sometimes, it is necessary for teachers to intervene or to take part in order to offer general support, ensure that students use the target language as well as deal with unsatisfactory groupings [21]. However, all these should be done in an appropriate way as too much control might hinder the development of the group members’ responsibility. Lastly, debriefing and feedback is needed as it is significant for making the task meaningful [23]. Students should present the result of their task; meanwhile, a certain amount of correction and assessment can be added when necessary, which aims to provide useful information for later learning [22], however, for most Chinese students who are worried about losing face, positive feedback should be emphasized.

Summary

With the purpose of developing students’ speaking ability, it is necessary to involve students within language learning in the classroom. Therefore, the use of group work in different teaching stages would not only increase the students’ speaking opportunities, but also make them learn to use the language within the classroom. In terms of group work composition, group member acceptance is crucial for Chinese learners, which needs English teachers to consider before making up groups in their classes. At the same time, grouping students in terms of students’ sitting—given the limited time in each lesson, as Tosuncuoglu [17] suggests that groups can stay in their original seats, which not only save time but also reduce confusion. What’s more, it is essential for students to know what the task is and how much time they can spend before proceeding to the group work. If learners have no idea about what they are supposed to do in the task, it wastes time, leads to confusion, and makes group work ineffectively. Positive feedback is also important for doing group work, particularly for some Chinese University students who lack the initiative to talk. By giving them positive feedback, students would be encouraged to take more risks the next time they use the language.

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