Groupwork in the EFL Classroom: Collaborative Learning and Peer Assessment

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概　要

本論文はEFL教室におけるグループ学習の効果と実践と評価について検討するものである。本論文はまた教室内における最も効果的なグループ形態を、グループ学習における優れた学習成果を最ももたらす活動形態と共に、学習者の数と構成の観点から探求する。最後にグループ学習の評価について検討する、すなわち、成果(product)と経過(process)などに採点を施し、EFL教室で追求されるグループ活動のなかで誰が何をしたかを立証する方法について論じる。

"Students can learn as much, or even more, from their peers as from their teachers, but the help students can give to each other is a severely under-utilised resource in higher education." (Boud, 1981).

Groupwork is an ideal way of actively involving students in the learning process. Studies have consistently shown that students who work together in a group not only tend to learn more of what is being taught, but also retain this information much more effectively than other teaching methods. Students also feel much more satisfied with the learning process and the outcomes of their work. This is especially true of the EFL classroom. Teacher talk time can often absorb a large percentage of total classroom time: in a class of over 20 students individual learners can have very few chances to practice the target language. Groupwork allows the main priority of classroom time to become the student's own oral production in an environment which allows students to practice the language away from what they may see as the critical ear of the teacher and the daunting prospect of the addressing the class as a whole. For the teacher this also means the opportunity to give more pertinent advice where and when it is needed in a discreet fashion. (Chickering and Gamson, 1991; Johnson, Johnson, and Smith, 1991).

Here, firstly the positive role of groupwork will be discussed as well as which types of grouping can be most effective within the EFL classroom. Secondly, an analysis of group dynamics will be explored, specifically the size and composition of groups. When planning activities or designing a task we need to keep in mind the best ways of organizing students and getting the task in focus. It is very important to create a group ethic, whereby each member is working under the notion of "one for all and all for one". In juxtaposition to this is the assessment of groupwork, which can often be seen as one of the biggest perceived problems of integrating groupwork into your lesson plans. How do you allocate marks between product and process? How do you

establish who did what in the group activity? And how do you cope with the different roles different students assume within the group? Finally, the relative merits and drawbacks of groupwork as opposed to whole class discussion will be discussed.

"Exploratory talk is that in which partners engage critically but constructively with each other's ideas. Relevant information is offered for joint consideration . . . . Knowledge is made publicly accountable and reasoning is visible within the talk . . .it is an effective way of using language to think . . .the process of education should ensure that every child is aware of its value and able to use it effectively." (Mercer, 2000)

Mercer highlights the value of groupwork as a catalyst for exploratory talk and as an example of collaborative learning; arguing that it is an effective way of using language to think. The relevance of this in the EFL classroom is that using language to think is a skill, which, while being very important, is an extremely difficult and forbidding one to set as an explicit goal. During groupwork, however, trying to think in a language becomes an implicit method of pursuing the task at hand; thinking in a language suddenly becomes a relevant and very real means of communicating with your peers. In this way, groupwork also promotes a critical engagement with language rather than a passive acceptance of what is being taught by rote. When students discuss their ideas or practice their grammar with their peers, they not only consolidate what they already know of the language but also sharpen and refine their understanding. When listening to peers, groupwork gives students time to connect new vocabulary or ideas with what they already know, this raises levels of engagement in the learning experience. In groupwork, the language or ideas of a member can also be challenged, extrapolated upon, or modified by other members of the group. This allows students to develop their own voice, as they may need to justify themselves, or rephrase speech, which in turn encourages the very positive role of self-assessment. The students are no longer completely dependent on the teacher or the textbook and can get used to learning from each other. Mercer also states, however:

". . .observational research evidence suggests that very little of it [exploratory talk] naturally occurs in classrooms when children work together in groups."

Putting students into groups does not necessarily entail that any of the positive factors of groupwork will "naturally" ensue. Effective lesson planning and organization of groups is vital. When designing tasks and attempting to address the aims and objectives of an EFL syllabus or an individual lesson, it is very important to think about which topics, themes, vocabulary, grammar, activities and projects best lend themselves to groupwork; the types of groupwork you will employ and the dynamics of these groups.

There are a number of names given to the type of learning and teaching that groupwork involves, some of these are perhaps: collaborative learning; peer teaching; peer learning; team learning etc. But generally, according to Johnson there are three main types of groupwork: informal learning groups; formal learning groups and study teams:

Informal learning groups are those spontaneous groups formed within the classroom. This can range from asking two students to join desks and practice a dialogue to groups of three to five students who will discuss ideas about a question you have posed and possibly brainstorm ideas ready for whole class discussion. Here the composition of groups can be less thoroughly planned and organized ad hoc being generally adopted for tasks that do not take a considerable amount of classroom time.

Formal learning groups on the other hand, are groups of students who have been placed in pre-planned teams with the objective of completing a specific task over a longer period of time in order to achieve an assessable piece of work. This can involve such things as creating a project, writing a dialogue for role-play or preparing a discussion for debate. These groups may stay together for several lessons or more. Here it is more important to consider the dynamics of the group and to strike a balance of students that will compliment each other and ensure a successful team.

Finally, study teams are groups of students who may work as a team for a long period of time, perhaps over one term or for the entire year. The groups will remain consistent and rather than working on specific identifiable and gradable tasks, their main purpose is to assist each other in such things as completing assignments, meeting deadlines and providing a safety net of support which can be especially valuable in larger classes. If one member misses a lecture or an important meeting the other members of the group can provide help and information. In classes with complex subject matter and where the student to teacher ratio is rather unbalanced, study teams can prove to be invaluable. The success of all these groups identified by Johnson can depend very much upon the careful planning and forethought of the teacher and this can be aided with thorough research of the classroom members beforehand, either through grades, entrance examinations or short observations of students during the initial weeks of a term.

Group dynamics are an important aspect of successful groupwork activity within the classroom. For exploratory talk and collaborative learning to flourish, groupwork has to be deliberately manufactured by the teacher and students also need to be made aware of its value. Perhaps the most important aspects of this manufacture include group size and group composition. There are a myriad of benefits and limitations to a range of group sizes and group compositions and it is most important to remember when it is appropriate to use these different ranges. Group size can range from a pair of students to large groups of five to seven students. Group composition can involve anything from friendship groups to single-sex groups.

When a students work as an individual on a problem they are forced to think for themselves, of course this is a vital aspect of classroom learning, within the group a weak student can often rely too heavily upon the knowledge of others in creating a dialogue or solving a question. The limitations of this, however, are that the student is isolated within his or her own experience and knowledge. When an individual is working alone, learning is consolidated to a degree, but space for refining this learning is greatly reduced. Groupwork can enhance this in a number of ways

depending on the number of members within that group. Knowing that peers are relying on you is a powerful motivator for group work (Kohn, 1986). Smaller groups of around two to four students tend to offer a secure and unthreatening environment whereby students are more confident and often obliged to talk. A student in a pair, for example, is more likely to be confident in making mistakes and being corrected by their peer than performing a dialogue in front of the whole class with the teacher. On the practical level smaller groups are also easier to administer within the classroom simply by joining desks or turning one pair to meet another. The drawbacks of smaller groups are that students are often too quick to reach a consensus due to the lack of different viewpoints on offer and mistakes can often be overlooked. Pair work is best used when the topic is personal or sensitive or when you only need a brief discussion. This can grow to two or three members when a teacher is looking to build confidence in performing a piece of work, increasing social interaction in the class and as an interim to whole class discussion.

Larger groups of five to seven students bring a much greater diversity of language experience and ideas. It provides a valuable bridge between a small group experience and whole class discussion. This raises a number of administration issues, however. It is often necessary to appoint certain roles within the group, such as a chairperson; a speaker or a compiler. During groupwork it is possible that the stronger members of the group can easily dominate others, so it is important to try to plan tasks so that every member of the group has a specific role. For example, each member of the group can be made responsible for a specific portion of a task and it will only be through collaboration that the team is able to produce a final product. Students can research information independently and it is only within the group that information is shared, edited and assessed by other members. (Smith, 1986; Tiberius, 1990). The optimum times for the use of larger groups are when discussion requires a range of views and experiences and for developing teamwork and group discussion skills. The oral experience of speaking in front of a large group is a very important one.

Composition of a group is also an important factor when planning a task. Friendship groups, for example, can provide a very secure and unthreatening environment. The stress of making mistakes and inhibition of speech is greatly reduced. Once again, however, friendship groups are often very quick to reach consensus on an issue and are much less likely to actively correct mistakes, and may even reinforce them. Friendship groups are therefore best assigned when sharing and confidence building are the main priority of the activity.

Groups can also be assigned according to ability, meaning that work can be targeted at the optimum level of challenge for the members of that group. It is sometimes beneficial in the early stages of a term to plan relatively easy tasks for a group and as students become more confident as a team to gradually increase the level of difficulty. For example, early activities can include reading from a dialogue that has already been designed by the teacher or written in a textbook, to recognizing simple vocabulary and grammar procedures. Later in the term students can study

more complex points or create their own dialogues consolidating the vocabulary and dialogue of previous activities. (Cooper and Associates, 1990).　Unfortunately ability groups are often very visible to the members of the class, which may cause resentment and a loss of confidence if a student feels he has been placed in a group that is of a different ability to how he perceives them. Low ability groups are also less likely to be academically stretched and benefit from the knowledge and language experience of the stronger members of a class.　Ability groups are therefore only really necessary when there is a strong need to differentiate the task at hand, assigning more difficult parts of dialogue according to the appropriate ability group.

A random mix of students can build up language experience of different partners and different views, allowing students a full view of the abilities of other members of the class.　This also provides models of language ability that a student can use as a comparison to his own.　Students often tend to favour these democratic groups, but without planning the random group can often lead to poor mixes and in more extreme cases bad group chemistry, which is detrimental to performance.　Random mixes are best used when students are wary of consistent group structures or when assigned groups have started to become stale.　According to Walvoord (1986) random mixes work best in small classes where students already know each other.

In contexts where one sex often loses out academically in the classroom, single sex groups could also be explored.　Across the curriculum, but perhaps more so in the foreign language classroom, there is often a stark divide between the performance levels of boys and girls.　Single sex groups can allow the teacher to target this divide, perhaps focusing on male students or assigning more gender appropriate tasks.　Single sex groups can sometimes be more comfortable for some students and often reduces distraction amongst group members.　Japanese students particularly gravitate towards single sex groups for the very reason that they feel more comfortable in performing in groups of this type.　Single sex groups, however, further the gender divides and prevent exposure to the full range of communication experiences.　The discomfort of performing in front of the opposite sex or indeed any uncomfortable situation is an important skill, which needs to be fostered.

These are a range of group dynamics that are worthy of consideration should the necessity arise, but perhaps the only positive way of ensuring a natural occurrence of collaborative learning and exploratory talk within a group is to carefully plan and structure groups beforehand.　According to Connery (1988) many instructors prefer to form groups for themselves taking into account academic achievement, levels of preparation, work habits and gender.　An idea proposed by Walvoord (1986) is a compromise between structured and random mix groups whereby students are asked to make a preference as to the students they would like to work with. This can be achieved through something as simple as writing the names of three students on a piece of paper and the teacher later using this as a basis for assigning teams themselves. Wolvoord also proposes that even if a group is not working well at first and even if the members request to be split that this group should remain together.　The addition of these split members

to other groups may be extremely disruptive and the very skill of learning to cope with unproductive interactions is one aspect of language communication which is necessary to master and which groupwork lends itself to nicely. Many teachers prefer this random assignment method, instinctively aiming to maximize the group's heterogeneity: a mix of males and females, group leaders and passive students as well as the optimistic and cynical (Fiechtner and Davis, 1992; Smith, 1986). This balanced approach does often tend to offer a wide range of language experiences and differentiation of work while at the same time allowing confidence building and comfortable, interdependent groupings. The importance of this is that the students in a group must grow to realize that each member has a responsibility to and a dependence on others and that one cannot succeed unless everyone in the group succeeds. Ways of ensuring this are rewarding the group as a whole for their outcomes, encouraging students to divide tasks equally amongst themselves and carefully planning tasks that compel students to reach a group consensus. (Johnson, Johnson and Smith, 1991).

The task and desired outcomes of the individual lesson plan or EFL syllabus will dictate the size and composition of a group if planned appropriately and these factors taken into proper consideration. After planning the size and composition of a group, however, there are also a host of general strategies to be taken into account.

Students need to learn how to work effectively within a group. As with any piece of class work, the aims and objectives of groupwork need to be defined for the class, the students should be aware of their individual role within the group and their reasons for being a part of it in an interactive and productive role. Students also need to know how they will be assessed, at what stage of the task they are currently working and a way of knowing when their task is complete. Many students may not have worked in collaborative groups before and in the language classroom there are many skills that need to be taught to ensure the group is effective. Speaking and listening skills are varied and complex: students need to be made aware of the importance of sensitivity to other ideas, particularly when managing disagreement; how to appropriately correct a peer and how to collaboratively master content.   Walvoord (1986) suggests a number of strategies groups can use to deal with uncooperative members for example. One way of accomplishing this was for the teacher to clearly relay to students that each member of the group would anonymously assess other members in terms of individual input and responsibilities during tasks which require long-term group participation. Members who often neglect their responsibilities would therefore be given low grades by the rest of the group. During the middle of a project this information could then be shared during a discussion as to how the groupwork is proceeding. A teacher may also utilize this procedure during shorter groupwork tasks by adding further criteria to assessment for that particular, albeit random, activity detailing the importance of the groupwork process towards the final product and its final grade. Used intermittently over the course of a term this would foster the notion that active participation is vital.

Also of course, consistent teacher supervision and prompting inspires a group to remain on task. The careful questioning of individual students about the task at hand makes sure that all members are focused on the task and aware of what is happening around them. According to Connery (1988) other options include keeping groups small to prevent room for hiding from work; making it an explicit objective for the group to handle its own unproductive behaviour rather than that of the teacher and even allowing groups by majority vote to dismiss an unproductive member. This member is then allowed to persuade the group to reconsider or else he will fail the task. But perhaps the best way of ensuring positive groupwork lies with the teacher ensuring he plans a task whereby it is clear that each member must contribute if the group is to reach its final output or the entire group will fail. When appropriate, it should also be made explicit that process also extremely important and will perhaps be assessed as equally as product. In the EFL classroom, particularly when the target language is the means of communication, process can often constitute the most compelling aspect of the group task.

Generally then, groupings should be teacher-managed and appropriate to the task, whether that be ability groups, mixed gender, friendship groups, size etc. All activities should have clear and explicit outcomes with a prior discussion of the teacher's aims and objectives. Students should know exactly how long they have for a task, preferably with intermittent reminders of time-left to keep them focused on the task. Roles can be allocated to the certain group members, such as timekeeper and spokesman and each member must be aware of his responsibilities. A group member is not only responsible for himself, but should also be made aware of his dependence on other members so as to reinforce collaboration.

Some final strategies can include providing a useful list of starter phrases and appropriate vocabulary to aid discussion, even something as simple as a list of opening sentences such as "I think that . . .", or "I agree, but . . ." can be invaluable. Group members can also assess each other in terms of how the group is progressing and perhaps provide feedback on ways they may improve in the future. Apart from students, the teacher's role also needs to be clearly defined. This will perhaps include temporarily joining groups, eavesdropping and prompting of discussion and giving interim feedback as the task progresses. With these general strategies in mind students and teacher are then properly equipped to deliver and engage in a meaningful activity that incorporates each of the beneficial outcomes of effective groupwork and collaborative learning. This can then hopefully lead to a definable and assessable final product as well as an assessable and engaging process

One of the biggest drawbacks, and something that is often seen as a negative aspect of groupwork, is that of appropriate assessment. Groupwork can often involve a great deal of time and effort and motivated students inevitably expect appropriate feedback and very often a specific grade for their endeavours. Assessment criteria targeting the process, as well as final product, are an integral part of the learning process in this type of activity. The assessment criteria must also be open and accountable for both the students and the teacher with a definitive

understanding of how these criteria will be applied. Assessment methods and the rationale behind them must be clearly identifiable to the students involved.

There are a number of methods that can be employed when assessing groupwork. The product of a group may range from a project report, to a presentation in the target language. The process behind the product can often be just as important and students should be made aware of this.. The groupwork process is also an important assessable learning tool and this raises many questions with a range of different problems being identifiable.   The method adopted for assessment again depends primarily on the type of task involved and the stated aims and objectives. One approach that can be adopted is to engage with the notion that the positive role of collaborative learning within the classroom exceeds that of the necessity for individual summative assessment. In this respect a group mark can be awarded and the same mark accorded to each individual member of that group. This rewards and reinforces effective collaboration but conversely many students may feel it unfairly awards members of a group which have been seen as passengers or even that they have been handicapped by certain individuals and may have achieved a better grade without them. Alternatively prior to the commencement of an activity, students can bid for and therefore be assessed upon definable portions of the task, this may often feel fairer to the students but doesn't really foster the collaborative ethic which groupwork targets. Yet another strategy therefore is the divided group mark. The group can be awarded a single mark that is then divided up among members of the group through the agreement of the members themselves. The danger here is that grades can be disproportionately awarded for simple assertiveness or negotiating skills, this danger can be alleviated, however, if a very clear set of criterion for assessment are established before the task begins and students are required to justify the division of grades amongst themselves and later to the classroom teacher.

This introduces the notion of peer assessment. If groupwork provides a process of peer learning, then surely it is only logical that it also introduces a process of collaborative assessment. Peer assessment is assessment of students by other students. While as teachers we are trained to identify and judge the quality of a group product, the process of learning within the groupwork activity can be a much more difficult one to quantify. Simple classroom observation by the teacher during groupwork sessions can be extremely difficult to justify to the students as effective method of assessment, even with clear criteria when we are rewarding marks according to process as well as product. Indeed the practicality for the teacher themselves is often difficult to negotiate. Peer assessment, however, provides positive gains in terms of teacher cost-effectiveness. The teacher's role can switch from assessing large numbers of students directly within the confines of classroom time to a role of managing peer assessment, keeping students on task and ensuring use of the target language (Race, 1998).   If students are communicating within their groups in the target language, a range of skills are being developed and nurtured and feedback in terms of assessment can be vital to foster these effectively. Peer

assessment provides both formative reviews to provide feedback and summative grading (Mowl, 1996, McDowell and Mowl 1996). Students of course will need instruction and practice on how to effectively assess their peers. It is important that all students clearly understand the criteria being used to provide their assessments. Making students aware of assessment criteria is true of all forms of teacher assessment, but perhaps differently in terms of peer assessment is the notion that the best way to ensure that this awareness is occurring is for the students to be actively involved in establishing the criteria for this assessment themselves before the task commences. One example of the positive effect this will have is that the students will ensure they remain committed to the target language during group discussion even when the teacher is out of earshot, it is their responsibility to remain on task rather than shirking from the target language at every given opportunity, as could be the case when the product is the impetus for final assessment coupled with the brief observation a teacher can afford to individual groups. Peer assessment is therefore not simply based upon the final assessment of student work during process and product, but also the setting of criteria and the selection of evidence of achievement by students themselves (Biggs 1999, Brown Rust and Gibbs, 1994).

Students that are involved with the assessment process are also developing important self-assessment skills. If a student is monitoring and making judgments upon his own performance then learning outcomes become much more apparent. When learning a second language it can often be very difficult to quantify progress, very often the only means of objective comparison students can make in terms of their progress is the rather seemingly unattainable model of fluency in the target language, particularly if class objectives and assessment criteria are not readily identifiable. If students negotiate their own assessment criteria then they begin to think critically about their learning; identifying appropriate standards for progress and making judgments as to what extent they are addressing these criteria for themselves. Students can therefore feel they are progressing in a language in real terms and identify their own progress and future objectives. This sense of ownership in their own learning can be ideal for increasing motivation and fostering a responsibility for their own progression in a language. The problem with many EFL students is that they can be under the misapprehension that learning a language is simply a process of osmosis between the teacher and themselves. By engaging with the assessment process metacognitive skills are enhanced and deep rather than surface learning is therefore encouraged.

Research shows that students become better at peer assessment as they gain experience with critical evaluation (Williams, 1992; Freeman, 1995). In this way students are able to provide effective, detailed, positive and timely feedback to each other with increasing confidence and accuracy. The teacher is also able to assess individual students much more effectively over a period of time and in much greater depth. What this highlights, however, is that the criteria for assessment and the student's initial efforts at peer assessment must be detailed, transparent and teacher guided. At first sight it must seem a rather unreliable form of assessment in terms of

accuracy and value. The demographics of groups often work against honesty and subjective assessment, especially if a task is failing within a group. It is for these reasons that the teacher makes it abundantly clear that thoughtful, truthful judgments are made and possibly that any peer assessment is done in confidentiality with students being obligated to justify their responses to the teacher later when necessary. At the same time, however, by no means does it mean that the final peer assessed grade is set in stone. It should be the teacher themselves that finally assigns a grade for the process as well as the product. It is perfectly acceptable, perhaps even compulsory, that teachers use their own professional judgment when deciding final marks with discretionary judgments being made at the final stages (Crooks, 1998). This process, however, should be made clear to students and be fully justifiable in a rationale manner.

Just as with other aspects of groupwork therefore, dealing with groupwork assessment requires the teaching experience and sensitivity to reach the correct balance between neutrality and commitment. Groupwork strategies as a whole require the tact to deal with disruptive, weak or domineering students, the knowledge of the task at hand together with the transparency of its aims and objectives and the diplomatic skills which allow a fair discussion with as many participants engaging with the language as possible. As an observer the teacher must decide whether or not to intervene in lively discussions in order to channel the talk into more linguistically productive areas or simply remain unobtrusive and allow the students to discover it for themselves and the best way to learn it. On occasion the teacher must also decide the appropriate opportunities to engage in groupwork as opposed to whole class discussion.

The importance of the whole class working together to achieve the same aims and objectives is an important one. The whole class discussion will provide a wider range of ideas, opinions and language experiences as opposed to the smaller group. It is identifying when this is best utilised by the teacher that groupwork becomes the most effective learning and teaching tool. There are times when learning a second language should be content based rather than form based, thus encouraging fluency and memorable exchange. On occasion the learning of a foreign language demands the simple process of drilling vocabulary and grammar. For the student that is naturally introverted and reflective, whole class discussion may also be more appropriate than the small group experience and it is generally acknowledged that individuals can have different learning styles (Felder, 1996). Groupwork and whole class discussion should ideally compliment each other. After groupwork, whole class feedback, whether it is the final product itself or a period of collective reinforcement and reflection will provide cohesion to the learning process and the flow of lessons across the school term. What groupwork adds to the whole class ethic is that everyone within the class has had an input into the discussion and therefore everyone in the room will have a reason for listening during whole class debate. With the confidence of having rehearsed beforehand in the intimate and secure environment of a group an individual may also feel much more able to contribute to that debate, particularly if the final product is that which requires an extended dialogue in the target language in front of the class.

Groupwork therefore fosters collaborative learning and coupled with peer assessment can instil in students a responsibility in their own advancement and an engagement in the learning process. If groupwork is used appropriately according to task and the dynamics of a group carefully considered beforehand the student's knowledge and understanding of the target language can be improved immeasurably. It allows the teacher to manage class time and objectives much more efficiently, allowing more scope for assessment of process as well as enhancing product. Perhaps most importantly it also allows the teacher to devote more time to the student's oral production, where perhaps otherwise teacher talk time takes precedent. During groupwork less confident pupils have a chance to use and practice the target language and the teacher is able to target much more effective individual learning experiences for his students. Groupwork is therefore an important tool in the language teacher's repertoire and when used appropriately one of his most effective.

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