GROUPING IN THE ESL CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

One of the ways of giving students more of the time they require to practise a language than is possible in the ESL classroom is by dividing the class into groups. The main strategies for assigning students to groups are random assignment and assignment by ability. Grouping helps teachers to individualise or match their teaching to individual learners. In implementing grouping for the ESL classroom, several aspects should be taken into account. They are the teaching context, the teaching content and the individual learner. In self-contained classrooms, a teacher's grouping arrangement depends on the size of the class, the groups, the activities and the classroom arrangement. Classroom cohesiveness is also very important. With respect to teaching content, a teacher should take into account the intended outcomes of the lesson, which may be knowledge or understanding, skills or attitudes. Grouping provides opportunities for peer interpretation and sharing of experiences and insights. It may also assist a teacher in accommodating learner differences by varying student roles and varying the types of student involvement. Thus, ESL teachers should think of grouping as a way to appreciate all the unique individuals that they may have the opportunity to meet and teach.

Introduction

As a generic term, grouping is *"...a way of organising students for teaching and learning."* (Freiberg & Driscoll, 1992:32). Many teachers think that grouping helps them individualise or match their teaching to individual learners, while others see grouping as a way of reducing the student crowds in the classrooms.

One of the ways of giving students more of the time they require to practise a language than is possible in the ESL classroom, is by dividing the class into groups. In this respect, the practice can be controlled or cued, as in a drill, or more creatively, as in role-play or discussion, where the focus is on communication rather than language practice (Gower & Walters, 1983). Having set up the practice, the teacher can then withdraw and monitor what is going on, giving help only when necessary.

According to Sidin (1993), groups are more than collections of individuals and are formed because members need to get something done or to produce something using knowledge and skills. A specific purpose of group work is to provide students with the knowledge and understanding of subject matter, while at the same time

focusing more on group dynamics where students are given direct experience to behave and react in a group situation. In addition, group activity enables students to acquire relevant skills of communication, skills of discussion and argument, skills of interactive learning and cooperative inquiry and to develop appropriate attitudes to learning and teaching.

In implementing grouping for the ESL classroom, important considerations should be given to three main aspects. They are the teaching context, the teaching content and the individual learner.

Teaching Context

In self-contained classrooms (classrooms designed for one group of students), a teacher's grouping arrangement depends on a number of factors. How the students' seats are arranged depends on the size of the class, the size of the groups, the types of activities and the layout of the furniture (Gower & Walters, 1983). If possible, the teacher can move the furniture in the class to make use of the corners of the room. However, he/she should avoid a situation where all members of a group are only on one side of a table, as it is important that they face each other. The teacher should also avoid separating the members of a group too far, making it difficult for them to talk easily. The teacher can also assign informal committees of students who go into action when a different arrangement is needed.

If the teacher teaches in an open-space school or in classroom without walls, he/she may have large spaces for grouping but other kinds of concerns. Teachers who work in such spaces must have common understanding with other teachers on several aspects, so as to avoid misunderstandings. Firstly, they must establish common agreement about the standards of student behaviour. Secondly, they must establish common agreement on student movement. Thirdly, they must identify activities scheduled for minimum noise. Lastly, they must coordinate the arrangement and use of furniture, equipment and supplies.

Another contextual consideration is time. In a self-contained classroom, the teacher should make decisions about pace and schedule. Grouping is best scheduled in short time periods, with opportunity for movement around the room between activities. Time periods may vary, for example, with primary students (5-20 minutes) and lower secondary students (20-40 minutes), as there are time limits in terms of student attention and interest (Freiberg & Driscoll, 1992). In an open-space classroom, however, the teacher is able to have more movement within and between groups, as well as more concurrent group activities, making time less structured.

According to Freiberg and Driscoll (1992), the kind of classroom that would best support grouping practices is a cohesive classroom. In a cohesive classroom, students develop socially and emotionally and are able to be group members. In this respect,

the classroom teacher should consider the norms of the class to determine its cohesiveness. Norms are shared expectations of how group members should think, feel and behave (Weber, 1994). Norms greatly influence interpersonal relationships because they provide guidelines that help members understand what is expected of them and what they should expect from others. Productive group norms are essential to group effectiveness (Weber, 1994). Therefore, one important task of the teacher is to help the group establish, accept and maintain productive group norms.

To achieve these, there must be frequent opportunities for student interaction. In this respect, several planned activities and assignments may provide such opportunities. Student committees can be formed to design and construct bulletin boards and displays. Student teams may also be responsible to discuss and solve class problems. In addition, student pairs may be encouraged to volunteer for classroom responsibilities, and students may also be encouraged to critique each other's work and assist with revision. A teacher may have the beginning of group development if students get to know each other well. Therefore, to keep the interaction going, the teacher should change group membership from time to time (e.g. every three to four weeks). He/She should also provide opportunities for students to get to know those of differing abilities.

Teaching Content
In considering the content of teaching, a teacher may begin by identifying the intended outcomes, which may be knowledge or understanding, skills or attitudes. As students learn in groups, they can also achieve additional goals related to working in groups.

Grouping provides the opportunity for peer interpretation and sharing of experiences and insights. This is where, in small groups, students may have more opportunities to paraphrase, explain, describe, ask for clarification, and talk about content than what whole class interactions may provide (Freiberg & Driscoll, 1992). The teacher is often the only adult in the classroom, and there are limits to the experience and insights he/she may bring. Therefore, each student can contribute additional experiences and insights and in small groups, they have the opportunities to do so.

Grouping can assist the practice and feedback that must accompany a teacher's teaching. A teacher may be able to effectively model and describe a new skill to 30 students, for example, but it is difficult to provide feedback to each and every individual. In this respect, the grouping of students can provide peer coaching as well as peer motivation (Freiberg & Driscoll, 1992). When students work in small groups to practise a skill, they can coach each other's learning. In each group, students can check each other's procedures and provide feedback. There is also the advantage of peer motivation when students work in groups. When students participate in a

small group, there is a personal quality to their work because others are aware of their efforts, their successes and even their struggles. Motivation is higher in these situations, especially when group members work on a group task. In this respect, complex tasks requiring well developed skills are much better accomplished through group work than individual work (Weber, 1994).

The influence of group norms is especially noticed when a teacher works on attitudes with students. In this respect, peer pressure is powerful, even for young students. In ESL secondary classrooms, social patterns and group sentiments influence how students respond to an attitude or value that is new or different. Thus, to teach content with attitude and value outcomes, it is necessary to provide opportunity for group discussions so that students can hear different points of view, and as discussion permits free expressions of opinions, its value in a language class is obvious (Cross, 1992). Students today are generally more experienced and can contribute significantly to insightful discussions. Thus, with grouping, every student can be involved in the activity.

Language Learner

Learners may bring individual differences, especially in their participation and the kind of roles they play in language classroom activities. Thus, grouping arrangements may assist a teacher in accommodating learner differences by varying student roles and varying the types of student involvement.

In a typical ESL classroom situation, most students perform a listening role and a few have a speaking or active role. In this respect, the level of participation is high for a few and minimal for many. It is also usual to have one member of each group acting as a leader or secretary (Cross, 1992). This is the person who will go to the teacher with any difficulties or with a final completed task. This makes class management much easier. However, this may create a situation where some students never experience leadership and some never experience being followers.

According to Freiberg and Driscoll (1992), cooperative learning strategies can offer alternative choices by allowing for varied roles for different experiences in the same activity. Through cooperative learning, the range of roles can be expanded and used in different grouping arrangements. Some examples of the varied roles are as a Direction Giver, a Summariser, a Generator, an Observer, a Record Keeper, a Reader, an Evaluator and a Resource Person.

A teacher can accommodate learner diversity by varying the types of involvement in groups. In this respect, within different group structures, learners may be involved independently, cooperatively and competitively. Even with a group task, some learners go about their work in an isolated way, some work in coordination with other learners,

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while others compete and work to be the best or the fastest. Some examples of the varying types of involvement are having a student share resources or materials, another student clarify an idea, still another to provide examples and others to provide controversy during group discussions.

Forming Groups

When forming groups for the ESL classroom, a teacher needs to take into account several important aspects, such as the size of each group and the selection of members for each group.

With respect to group size, the larger the group, the broader the range of experiences, expertise, skills and interests to contribute to the learning activity. The amount of materials may also determine the size of each group, as also the amount of time allocated for the learning activity. In this respect, smaller groups can be more efficient. In addition, the size of the task and the number of component responsibilities may also determine group size. Larger groups of six members or more, may require skills of coordination and collaboration for every individual to be involved. However, larger groups have the potential for members to be uninvolved or to dominate others.

With group work, it is also advisable for the teacher to first mention which books or materials the students need before he/she fixes the group size, so as to prevent a series of return journeys to fetch the necessary items once the activity starts (Underwood, 1987). Thus, the teacher will realise that even though group size may look like a simple decision, nevertheless, it has significant implications, as according to Weber (1994), the teacher will find that variance in group size will mean variance in student experience and learning. In assigning students to groups, a teacher should begin by considering the outcomes that he/she wants the group to achieve, and then proceed to select suitable students. For example, if the teacher wants the groups to develop sketches, then he/she would probably need one or two creative individuals in each group. Thus, it is important for the teacher to consider diversity in group composition.

Two main strategies for assigning students to groups are random assignment and assignment by ability. For random assignment, Gower &Walters (1983) suggest several ways where the teacher can be random. The teacher can give each student a number (i.e. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, etc.) and then ask all number 1's, 2's, 3's etc. to sit together. The teacher can also blindfold as many people as there are to be groups, who then in turn touch the people that are to be in their groups. Another way is by dividing the class on the basis of horoscope groupings, likes and dislikes, colour of clothes, hobbies, gender etc. The teacher can also have as many pieces of string in the hand as there are to be pairs. Students take an end and find their partner. Lastly,

the teacher can give out to each student at random a card with a word written on it. The students then have to go round and find words related to the subject matter (e.g. traffic light, road, car, etc.) and would then sit together in a group. With respect to assignment by ability, the teacher may want to place students of similar ability levels in one group, a strategy called 'ability'or 'homogeneous'grouping, or he/she may want to structure each group with a representation of high ability, middle ability, and low ability students, a strategy called 'stratified'or 'heterogeneous' grouping (Chitravelu, *et al.,* 1995).

Other strategies for assigning students to groups are assignment by social criteria and assignment by interest (Freiberg & Driscoll, 1992). In assignment by social criteria, the teacher may begin by assessing the social skills and relationships among his/her students. The teacher will then consider grouping them to complement or to provide diversity by mixing the 'introverts' with the 'extroverts' and the leaders with the followers. He/she can use sociogram information or student lists of desired work partners or team members to guide him/her. Lastly, in assignment by interest, the teacher can begin by first surveying his/her students' interests, and then grouping them together according to topics of shared interest. The teacher may find that there is nothing more satisfying than to observe a group working on a topic that they are interested in, sharing ideas and working at an impressive momentum.

Conclusion

ESL teachers should think of grouping as a way to appreciate all the unique individuals that they may have the opportunity to meet and teach. In this respect, they can begin with the process of information gathering, by looking at their teaching context, reviewing their teaching content and by getting to know their learners individually. When all this information is taken into consideration, the teachers will be ready to make effective decisions with regard to the process of grouping for teaching and learning activities in ESL classrooms.

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