Using Pair and Group Interaction to Foster Students' Interpersonal Skills

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Introduction

The main aim of my action research was to introduce pair and group interaction activities, and thus to help students develop their interpersonal skills. I also aimed to increase the use of child-centred activities where the students are the main focus in the classroom. During my teaching practice placement experiences in schools in the UAE over four years, I have observed that most of the English language classes are teacher-centred. The students in such classes are passive learners who hardly participate in the lesson. I have noticed that teachers rarely use pair and group activities in the classroom, which means that the students work individually most of the time. On the few occasions where teachers introduce pair or group activities, as I observed, the students show a lack of understanding of the necessary interpersonal skills, such as turn taking.

This action research project was carried out during my internship in a class of twenty two Grade Two students in a large primary girls’ school government school in Sharjah. Like all government schools in the UAE, Arabic is the medium of instruction, and English is taught as a class subject. In the classrooms, students are seated in rows and there is hardly any interaction among the students during classes.

Research Questions

The following are the research questions I focused on when conducting my classroom-based action research:

- How do students respond to pair and group activities?
- What influence might pair and group activities have on fostering students’ interpersonal skills?
- What sort of pair and group activities are appropriate for ESL learners in Emirati school classrooms?
- How can teachers use pair and group interaction activities to foster students’ interpersonal skills?

Literature Review

Vygotsky, cited in Arends (2000) argues that when students interact with each other they build on their understanding, learn new ideas and concepts, and develop their cognitive skills (p. 354). Thus, pair and group activities are essential in the classroom as they provide students with an opportunity to work collaboratively; and when working on pair and group activities, more capable students can work with those who find it difficult to complete the tasks on their own.

Furthermore, pair and group interaction activities encourage communication among students. According to Lightbown and Spada (1999), “Learner language in group work activity is filled with questions and responses and many more occasions where learners
take the initiative to speak spontaneously” (p.124). Most importantly, Lightbown and Spada also note that student-centered activities motivate the students to use language for different purposes such as disagreeing, requesting, and clarifying (p.124).

Pair and group activities influence the learning of a language as they provide learners with an opportunity to communicate using the target language. In fact, as Lightbown and Spada point out, pair and group activities are implicit in the communicative approach to language teaching, as it focuses not only on the understanding of the structural elements of a language, but also on the role of the social interaction and language use in learning the language (p. 92). Many researchers also place an emphasis on the importance of peer involvement and pair work in enhancing students’ confidence and the self-esteem of shy students. Pair work and group work help in drawing out withdrawn children and enhances their confidence and participation levels in the classroom (Brophy, 1996).

Teaching Strategy

Since I concentrated on using the communicative approach to teaching English during my teaching internship, I had an opportunity to introduce co-operative group activities to the students. I provided them with group interaction activities that allowed them to communicate with each other and to work collaboratively. Pair and group interaction activities such as matching activities, making posters about their favourite food, and talking about their favourite toys were introduced to the students. As an example, students completed an activity in small groups when studying the unit, “Having Fun” where they were given small cards with action verbs written on them, and they were asked to match each card with the picture in the chart. Another example was in a lesson related to the unit “Toys”, when I asked the students to choose their favourite toys from the pictures they were provided with, cut them out and create, in small groups, their favourite toy cupboard. I also introduced some group work rules which I placed on a chart. The rules included ‘listen to your peer(s)’, ‘help each other’, ‘wait for your turn’, ‘speak English’, and so on. I needed to constantly encourage the students to respect and support each other in order to ensure that the students were assisting each other and to make them feel part of a team who had a shared goal.

Methodology

Classroom-based action research aims at improving teaching and learning. According to Russell (1997), Action research is a term used to describe professionals studying their own practice in order to improve it. Applied to teaching, it involves gathering and interpreting “data” to better understand an aspect of your teaching that interests or concerns you.

Since action research is a qualitative approach to research, qualitative data collection methods were used to gather data for my research. According to Burns (1999), “Techniques for collecting action research data are generally qualitative in nature, reflecting the primary purpose to investigate practice critically and to work towards changing it within the context of the teaching situation.” (p. 78).
Triangulation is a term that refers to the researcher’s use of more than one source of data when gathering information about the issue they are studying (Mills, 2003, p. 52) and this was taken into consideration when carrying out my classroom-based action research. I conducted interviews with my mentor school teacher and with my mentor college teacher. The interviews focused mainly on how they perceived the importance of pair/ group interaction activities in enhancing the students’ interpersonal skills, the most appropriate group activities for ESL learners, the advantages and disadvantages of pair and group work and how pair and group interaction activities could be used in the classroom to foster the students’ interpersonal skills like turn taking, listening to their peers and the levels of participation.

I also chose questionnaires to get feedback from the Grade Two students on the pair and group work activities. According to Burns (1999), questionnaires have the advantage of being easier and less time-consuming to administer than interviews, and the responses of larger numbers of informants can be gathered. Since I was working with Grade Two students, I used a smiley-face questionnaire, and I explained each statement in the questionnaire so that the students could complete it comfortably.

In addition, I observed the students’ behavior on a regular basis while they were working on pair and group activities. These observations gave me the chance to reflect on the students’ responses to the pair and group interaction activities in the classroom, and to judge to what extent they helped in fostering the students’ interpersonal skills. Burns (1999) commented that “Observation enables researchers to document and reflect systematically upon classroom interactions and events, as they actually occur rather than as we think they occur” (p. 80). I also kept a research journal as one of my data collection tools because, in Burns’ words, “Journals contain more subjective and personal reflections and interpretations than the relatively formalized recordings of notes” (p. 89).

In terms of ethical considerations, I discussed my action research with my mentor school teacher in order to know if getting written permission from parents was necessary or not when collecting samples of students’ work. She said that in this case, informing her about my action research was enough, and there was no need to get written permission from parents. I informed the students that they were the main participants in my action research. Confidentiality was taken into consideration, and the action research did not harm the participants in any way.

**Data Analysis**

Before carrying out my classroom-based action research, if I had been asked if young learners liked pair and group work, I would have said that “Yes! Children like pair and group activities.” However, if I were asked this question now, I would say that not all students like pair and group activities.

When collecting my data, I found that students of the same ability level, especially low achieving students, would work collaboratively on tasks. On the other hand, other, mostly high achieving students, preferred to work on their own. This is in evidence in my observation notes on the students’ responses when I asked them to work in groups to create books about their favourite animals. The following are some of their responses
and even though some of them include some grammatical errors, I chose to include them because I think they represent how some of the high achieving students in my class responded to pair and group activities:

- “No teacher!”
- “Everyday group work!”
- “I not work with N”
- “I do it alone”
- “Teacher, look at R. She not let us work with her”.

Most of the time, high achieving students would dominate the activities and would not pay much attention to turn taking, listening to their peers, or making eye contact with them.

Some of the high achieving students did not mind working with their friends or with students of the same levels. They did complain when they were placed with students who were not as advanced in the English language as they were, however. For instance, when I asked the students to label some pictures of toys, one child, (R.), said that she did not want to work with another child, (F.) She then told me the names of the students she wanted to work with. She chose high achieving students to work with in spite the fact that she was a high achieving student herself and she did not need the support of the other girls to accomplish the task. I believe she thought that working with low achieving students would slow down the process of completing tasks.

From my observations, I also found out that it is better if the type of activities introduced to the students require the cooperation of all of the group members in order to be completed. I noticed that students concentrated more on tasks when each one of them was assigned a role, so I learnt that it is vital to assign a role for everyone in the group. For example, when I asked the students to work in groups to create a poster about their favourite animals, I assigned roles to each student in the group. I asked one of them to be responsible for drawing the animal, another one for colouring it, while two of them were responsible for writing a short description about it, and then one of them was responsible for presenting the poster to the rest of the class. In this way, I made sure that all the students took an active part in the activities given to them. I also made sure that all the students took turns, shared their ideas and cooperated with each other. One of my observers, my mentor college teacher, was in agreement with my findings as she believes that

“Children learn the ability to take turns especially if the group or pair is allocated roles such as leader, reporter, recorder, time keeper…etc. They then need to listen to each person and participate according to their roles.”

Moreover, I noticed that pair and group interaction activities contributed to enhancing the confidence and self-esteem of some students, as they felt that they could achieve more when they worked in groups. This was apparent in the structured observations checklists that I completed twice during the internship, first in the third week and again
in the ninth week of the internship. These checklists illustrated the gradual change in the students’ confidence, attitude, and ability to work in pairs or groups. In week three, most of the students were recorded as ‘satisfactory’ in my checklist in the following areas: listening to peers, using phrases that facilitate communication, asking clarification questions, and communicating with group members. By week nine most of the students showed improvement in their interpersonal skills. For example, all of them were ‘excellent’ in turn taking and making eye contact when they worked in groups. Moreover, two of them scored ‘excellent’ in communicating with their peers.

Despite the fact that my introduction of pair and group activities caused some discipline problems at the beginning, I noticed a gradual change in the students’ attitudes towards working in pairs or small groups over time. I interpret this to mean that the classroom management difficulties I faced at the beginning were the result of a classroom environment where group interaction activities were rarely introduced to the students.

However, teachers should be aware of the fact that sitting the students in groups is not an indication that they are actually cooperating with each other. The types of activities introduced to the students influence the extent to which the students interact with each other. Assigning roles to the students is always a good starting point, especially if the students are not used to working in groups.

Pair and group interaction activities that were introduced to the students such as matching activities, making posters about their favourite food and talking about their favourite toys were a motivational factor that encouraged them to take responsibility and initiative to help their group members. This was evident when the students were asked to bring their favourite toys from home and talk about them. I was surprised to see that some of the quiet students, who hardly showed any interest in taking part in group activities, were willing to describe their toys to their peers. I interpret their reaction as a sign of increased confidence and interest in the lesson.

In general, from my findings I can say that the influence of pair and group interaction activities in fostering students’ interpersonal skills is affected by the way they are introduced to the students. The unfamiliarity with pair and group interaction activities might create some discipline problems, especially if the teacher is working in a school context where pair and group activities are hardly used in the classroom. However, teachers can manage that by using different strategies such as the use of a pair and group work rules chart where the teacher outlines the rules the students have to follow when they work in pairs or groups.

**Conclusions**

My goal was to examine the influence that pair and group interaction activities have on fostering students’ interpersonal skills and how teachers can benefit from using pair and group activities to achieve this goal. Bearing in mind that “The goal of action research is to understand what is happening in your school or classroom and to determine what might improve things in that context” (Mills, 2003, p.89), my classroom-based action research gave me some insights into how teachers can foster students’ interpersonal skills through the use of pair and group interaction activities.
Based on the results of my strategy, the following are my recommendations:

- Teachers can introduce pair and group work activities into English language teaching in schools by starting with their own classrooms. Other teachers could be invited in order to see how pair and group interaction activities are used in the classroom.

- Initiating informal discussions with other teachers in the school will also provide opportunities to share teaching strategies and teaching resources, and will allow teachers to benefit from each other’s experiences in the classroom.

- Cluster meetings with teachers from other schools in the same area will provide opportunities where effective teaching strategies or activities can be shared.

- Teachers can give workshops, or attend workshops, that aim at enhancing teacher’s understanding of how pair and group interaction activities can be used to foster the students’ interpersonal skills.

- Most importantly, more research needs to be done in the area of using pair and group interaction activities to improve students’ speaking, listening, reading and writing skills. I strongly recommend that action research is conducted in different areas of education in the UAE, especially given that a research culture does yet not exist in the Gulf region (Syed, 2003).

All in all, my classroom-based action research provided me with an opportunity to explore this issue in some depth in the UAE context. It also illustrated the lack of understanding of the significance of using pair and group activities in the EFL classroom in the UAE at this time. This research provided me with a better understanding of the classroom practices in ESL classrooms. Moreover, I hope this research project will help teachers to see the significance of providing the students with interactive activities and learning opportunities that encourage them to interact in an authentic way in the classroom.

**References**


Jersey: Merrill Prentice Hall.
