

USING GROUP WORK TO IMPROVE ENGLISH SPEAKING SKILL OF THE FIRST YEAR STUDENTS AT THE FACULTY OF LAW, VIETNAM NATIONAL UNIVERSITY-HANOI

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ABSTRACT:

This study aims at finding out the effects of group work activity in improving the English speaking skill among first-year non-English major students of the Faculty of Law, Vietnam National University (VNU) - Hanoi. 25 first - year students were interviewed and teacher observation was carried out weekly during group work activities of speaking lessons. The study finds out that group work activities effectively help students reduce their anxiety of speaking English, and to some extent, the overall English speaking skill of students has been improved through these activities.

Keywords: group work, speaking skill, non-English major student.

1. Introduction

Speaking is one of the most important skills that most learners of any foreign languages wish to achieve. It is an important skill that 'makes you a more fluent language user; speaking is a chance to notice the gaps between what you want to say and what you can say; it is a chance to test hypotheses about language' (Marilyn Lerris, 1999-quoted by He Lina). At the Faculty of Law, VNU, English has been taught as a compulsory subject. All of the students are non-majored English students. And speaking is a problem for most of them. During the speaking lessons, the students here usually keep silence whenever I ask

them to say something in English they just say yes/no to this kind of questions and encounter a lot of difficulties with open- ended questions such as 'why' or 'what do you think...?'; most of them feel nervous with speaking practice exercises.

Although our students start with the beginner level of English when they enter the college and are supposed to obtain the intermediate level after graduation, just a small amount of them are capable enough of communicating in English. In fact, our students are more competent in reading, writing, and listening to English but not in speaking English and they think it is their biggest problem in learning English. Why is this case so

common? This can be blamed on some reasons: the effect of entrance examinations, the students' characteristics of being quiet and shy, the teachers' difficulties in controlling oral communication activities in large classes, or the lack of oral communicative activities in the textbooks,...

Due to the researcher's teaching experience, she realizes that her students are afraid of making oral mistakes, because they think their mistakes cannot be 'erased' once they are uttered out. Anxiety in speaking English is a real problem. And the oral activities done in the English class are often irrelevant to their daily life. These two obstacles prevent the students from learning to speak in English.

Therefore, this research focuses on studying these students' problems in the English-speaking class and suggests some teaching techniques and strategies that can be used to overcome these problems by using group work to reduce anxiety and encourage communication among these students. The researcher decided to carry out the research work entitled "Using group work to improve English speaking skill of the first-year students at the Faculty of Law, VNU".

2. Methodology and methods

The methodology I used to carry out this study is qualitative. I decided to choose this methodology because qualitative methodology is concerned with the participants' viewpoints, attitudes towards a particular issue. In this research, I employed teacher's observation and follow-up interview.

In my study I used one of the classes - AV 01 with 25 students for the source of data. The teacher's observation was carried out weekly during the application of group work activity in speaking lessons. As regards semi-structured interview, I asked one of my colleagues to help me randomly select 10 students from the group AV 01 to take part in this interview. The reason why I intended to choose 10 students for the interview because I think I could get ample data from this number of participants. If I had carried

out the interview to all 25 students, I would definitely have had difficulties dealing with a lot of data. To make students feel comfortably during the interview, the interviewer was one of my colleagues and I asked my students' favors to spare around three minutes each to demonstrate their ideas at the end of the speaking lesson in the classroom. Of course, so as to assemble the data gathered by my students, the interviewer utilized tape recorders and notes. This interview was delivered at the last week of group work application.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. The teacher's observation

**Students' attitude changed: they became more attentive and enthusiastic to speaking lessons.*

Through my class observation, I could see the differences in my students' classroom behavior and performance. The quiet atmosphere did not last any more. The students began to be more active in the group work. The timid students found their chance to speak English. They did not sit back and watch the lesson instead of participating. Seeing this attention and enthusiasm on my students' part, I felt quite relieved and thought my efforts were not in vain.

**Students had more time and opportunities to practice English in the class.*

Before the intervention, only some students spoke. These were the ones who created the language atmosphere in the speaking lessons. The rest just kept silent and listened. However, they have now changed. When sitting together in smaller 'class' of 5 students, it seemed that they felt more confident to speak out, they speak more.

**The newly arising problems*

The more active class also meant a noisier class. The students sometimes became excited. And when walking round the class, I recognized that they used English when I was somewhere nearby, and they used Vietnamese when I was far away from them.

3.2. The follow-up interview

A set of 7 questions were asked to find out the students' attitudes to group work and how

effective it was in reducing students' anxiety and encouraging real communication in speaking class.

** Students' attitudes to group work*

Most of them liked working in groups in speaking lessons. They agreed that group work activities created a positive effective climate. They felt more relaxed to talk in smaller group than in front of the teacher or the whole class. 5 students said that they did not feel as anxious as they had before. 20 students were more confident to express themselves.

** Effectiveness of group work*

All students said they obeyed the rules seriously. They also added that they got their chance to speak. Dominant students knew how to control themselves to let shy students give their opinions. Timid students also had chance to speak. A more equal participation in group work activities was created.

They also added that the group secretaries' mentioning the speakers' names in records had a very good effect on their learning behavior. The weak students were encouraged to talk and in fact could talk more. The strong students were still dominant in groups but now they helped others with words or correcting the mistakes.

When being asked about the role of the group leaders and secretaries, 20 students thought that they did not really need these positions. According to them, the leaders did not do more work than other members in the group. The leaders also had to obey the rules (like others), so they could give their opinions when their turns

came. They also did not have to remind others of their turns as they were all sure about this. Besides, some secretaries slowed down the speed of group activities as it took time for to record the group ideas and attract the others' attention to their writing up.

For the questions about the group division, they all said that they liked to work in a mixed-ability groups. The main reason for this option was that in these types of groups, the stronger students could help the weaker ones, the weaker could get more motivation to speak, and had chance to learn from their partners.

However, there were some complaints about problems that arising from group work: the class was noisy as some students became overexcited; some students did not really want to take part in group work; they did not really listen to each other attentively as being busy with thinking about ideas they were going to give when their turns came, and they used Vietnamese to talk about the topic given and talked away.

Anyway, the above conducted strategies made quite good effects on group work: students wanted to talk more.

4. Conclusion

After conduction the research, I got some experience in using group work for my lessons. With group activities in my speaking lessons, the class atmosphere is no longer boring. My students feel more relaxed to give their opinions and less worried about making mistakes. I can realize that group work activities have helped a lot in reducing students' anxiety in speaking English ■

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**ÁP DỤNG HOẠT ĐỘNG NHÓM ĐỂ CẢI THIỆN
KỸ NĂNG NÓI CHO SINH VIÊN NĂM THỨ NHẤT
KHÔNG CHUYÊN NGỮ TẠI KHOA LUẬT,
ĐẠI HỌC QUỐC GIA HÀ NỘI**

● PHẠM THÙY DƯƠNG

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TÓM TẮT:

Nghiên cứu này nhằm tìm hiểu tính hiệu quả của hoạt động nhóm trong việc cải thiện kỹ năng nói của sinh viên không chuyên tiếng Anh năm thứ nhất tại Khoa Luật, Đại học Quốc gia Hà Nội. Trong nghiên cứu này, 25 sinh viên năm thứ nhất đang học tại Khoa Luật, Đại học Quốc gia Hà Nội đã được mời tham gia trả lời các câu hỏi phỏng vấn. Đồng thời, nghiên cứu triển khai việc quan sát giáo viên xuyên suốt quá trình áp dụng hoạt động nhóm trong các tiết học nói. Kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy hoạt động nhóm đã có hiệu quả rõ rệt trong việc giảm sự lo lắng của sinh viên khi nói tiếng Anh, từ đó những hoạt động nhóm này, ở một chừng mực nhất định, đã giúp cải thiện kỹ năng nói tiếng Anh của sinh viên.

Từ khóa: hoạt động nhóm, kỹ năng nói, sinh viên không chuyên ngữ.