

The Advantages and Disadvantages of using Small Group and Pair Work in the Classroom

Linda Martine

Himeji Dokkyo University

Abstract

Having students work in small groups and pairs has been a regular feature of classrooms in English speaking schools for a long time. However, this has not always been the case in language learning classrooms in Asia. This workshop looked at the advantages and disadvantages of using small group work and pair work activities particularly for Asian students. The use of small group work and pair work activities in this workshop illustrated how despite the perceived disadvantages of these types of activities they can be turned into positive learning experiences. Participants were given the opportunity to give feedback in discussions held throughout the workshop.

Introduction

More and more non-native English speaking students seem to be electing to study at universities in English speaking countries. Research done on the challenges faced by international students reveals that lack of experience with working in small groups and pairs has been a stumbling block in regards to their classroom interaction with Native English speaking classmates (Martine, 2001). Since the use of small group work (SGW) and pair work (PW) is common in English speaking schools, it seemed pertinent to me to examine what the pros and cons of utilizing SGW and PW in Asian classrooms are and devising ways to make SGW and PW more user friendly for Asian English language teachers. The workshop used SGW and PW activities to highlight what the advantages of these task types are, while also discussing what the disadvantages are, especially in Asian classrooms, and then exploring ways to counter act these disadvantages.

Advantages of SGW and PW

At the start of the workshop, participants were asked to work in small groups for 10 minutes to brainstorm the advantages of using SGW and PW in ESL/EFL classrooms.

Four main advantages were isolated from the participants' suggestions and discussed in further detail. These were:

- SGW and PW increase students' talking time
- SGW and PW can mimic real English conversations
- SGW and PW create a more secure and positive classroom atmosphere

- SGW and PW are more fun.

SGW and PW increase students' talking time

Long and Porter (1985) estimated that in a 50 minute lesson with 30 students, if the students talked only to the teacher, they would get 30 seconds of talking time per lesson. They calculate that this equals "just one hour per student per year" (p. 208). Therefore using SGW and PW quite simply substantially increases the opportunities the students get to speak English.

SGW and PW mimic typical 'real' English conversations.

The language learning classroom can never accurately replicate the experience of using a language in an authentic context. Therefore it was with caution that we used the word 'real' regarding this advantage. However, it is important to try to create as genuine a language learning environment in the ESL/EFL classroom as possible. To illustrate how SGW and PW can help to facilitate this, the workshop participants engaged in an activity, that involved using small group discussion to come up with a list of adjectives to describe their ideal wife/girlfriend or husband/boyfriend. After the activity, we discussed the benefits of these activities for our students. This type of SGW involves the conversational techniques of agreeing, disagreeing, negotiation of meaning and clarification. These are all important strategies that are often used in English conversations. Another important part of SGW and PW is that it should give students the chance to share real information about themselves and their lives. SGW and PW should be relevant and interesting to students (this will be examined later in this paper). The goal of communicative teaching which utilizes activities like these is to establish a truthful exchange of meaningful communication.

SGW and PW create a more secure and positive classroom atmosphere

For most students, being called on by the teacher to answer a question in front of their peers can be a frightening experience. Even if they think they have an idea about the answer, they are often not sure if it is correct. If they don't know the answer panic can occur and usually dead silence is the result. This kind of atmosphere can promote a fear of making errors which is counterproductive to language learning. Taking risks and making errors is all part of effective language learning. However, in a small group or as part of a pair, there is a sense of security because they are working with their classmates to come up with an answer or accomplish a task. There is no pressure on one solitary student. As a group or pair they share the responsibility for the work. They are also allowed the freedom to come up with answers that reflect their own thinking. This promotes the idea that there is often no correct answer, a

very important concept some language learners have a hard time grasping.

SGW and PW are more fun.

This final advantage highlights the need to engage the students fully in their language acquisition. SGW and PW can do this by making the classroom an entertaining and lively environment. SGW and PW give the students more speaking time and allow them to use a greater variety of English to express what they really want to communicate. This type of work usually motivates students because it is quite simply more fun to work and talk with your classmates than it is to do tasks individually. By making lessons and activities more fun we can stimulate students not just to come to class but to also enthusiastically contribute to their own learning.

Disadvantages of SGW and PW

The participants were then asked to work in pairs and discuss the disadvantages of using SGW and PW in ESL/EFL classrooms. After 10 minutes the discussions ended and four main disadvantages were isolated and explored in further detail. These disadvantages were:

- SGW and PW will not help students pass university entrance examinations.
- The teacher may feel like they are losing control of the class.
- Students will speak only in their L1.
- Teachers are often concerned that students will pick up incorrect English from other students.

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SGW and PW will not help students pass university entrance examinations.

The participants indicated that the situation in Vietnam is very similar to Japan in that there is a lot of pressure on junior high and high school students to have high level English reading and writing skills because this is the main focus of their university entrance examinations. Thus improving students' listening and speaking skills is not given high priority. Therefore once students enter university it is not uncommon to find they have little or no experience with SGW and PW

However in Japan, an action plan published by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology in 2003 stressed that eventually universities will be evaluating students' "communicative competence" (Weaver and Romanko, 2005). It is not unreasonable to assume that speaking will form a major part of this competence. Therefore since SGW and PW increases students' speaking and listening opportunities it is important to promote the use of these types of activities.

Another factor that may affect many Asian countries particularly at the university level is that the newest version of the TOEFL test includes a speaking section (Gess and Markley, 2005). This is especially important information for students who may be preparing to study abroad at English speaking universities in the future as many universities require students to take the TOEFL test as part of their admittance requirements. So our students will be ahead of the game if we have prepared them for these challenges by giving them as much practice as possible of using conversational English.

The teacher may feel like they are losing control of the class.

Brown (1994) notes for students and teachers, who have not had a lot of experience with SGW and PW, that it can be a bit frightening at first. However, by introducing SGW and PW in small doses both teachers and students will soon see the benefits of these activities. The most important aspect to remember is the activities must be set up carefully and the learners must have very clear instructions on how to accomplish the activity. After the activity starts, the teacher's role is to monitor the students, offering assistance when necessary. However, it can be a bit daunting at first to try and keep an eye on several groups at once. The participants of this workshop came up with a wonderful metaphor to describe the process of teachers becoming accustomed to using SGW and PW. They likened it to being a ringmaster in a multi-ring circus, but stressed with practice it is not difficult to watch out that the lions don't eat the dogs and the humans don't fall off the high wire.

Students will speak only in their L1

The workshop participants came up with several reasons why this may occur. These included; the activity may be too difficult, it may be too easy or it may be just plain boring for the students. So the solution the participants offered was to choose activities that are relevant, interesting and fun for the students. Another occasion when students may use too much L1 is when they do not understand the instructions. This refers back to the point offered above which is that the instructions must be very clear to the students, so they know exactly how to complete the task successfully. Some participants felt that giving instructions in the L1 was appropriate, especially for their lower level students.

Teachers are often concerned that students will pick up incorrect English from other students

One point raised by the participants was that in SGW and PW the teacher is not always on hand to correct errors and mistakes. Therefore students will use incorrect or pick up unusual English from other students. However, research done by Long and Porter (1985) reveals that the amount of mistakes students make does not increase in SGW and PW. They have also

shown that attempts by teachers to correct students' speech errors in class are often ignored. In other words, frequent explicit correction has very little effect. Furthermore, Brown (1994) supports the use of SGW and PW stating that students often carry out peer correction in these activities and this is more productive than teachers always correcting students. Finally to repeat a point made earlier in this paper, we learn more effectively from our errors because we are more inclined to remember them.

Conclusion

"...the theory of language...is that language has meaning only in and through social practices" (Gee, 1998, p.8). The workshop, on which this paper is based, was intended to illustrate how the advantages of using small group and pair work in ESL/EFL classrooms far outweigh the disadvantages. As Gee points out in this quote, language is connected to the idea of communication. By using SGW and PW in our classes we can help our students see that language usage is more than the sum of its grammatical and collocational parts, it is about effectively connecting with others in order to establish yourself as a unique and valuable member of the community, in this case the classroom community.

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