

Group Work Impact on Academic Communication: Female English Student Teachers' Views

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ABSTRACT English Second Language (L2) learners/students experience challenges in communication within the academic setting. The research paper was conducted among twenty (20) purposefully sampled female third-year level former dropout student teachers at a selected university in South Africa. The paper explored the value of group work among female third-year level English student teachers, who had unpleasant experiences relating to early marriage and/or teenage pregnancy which compelled them to drop out of school. An interview schedule comprising questions relating to the benefits of group work was used to obtain students' views. The sampled students were involved in various study groups which they had formed; and they responded positively to all the questions. The results revealed that all the students who performed well in discussions, class exercises, tests, assignments and examinations were members of particular study groups. The research concludes that the students' good communication and improved academic performance was largely dependent on knowledge gained from the discussions held within the groups.

INTRODUCTION

Most undergraduate students in previously disadvantaged South African universities register for an English major without adequate competence and background knowledge in English as a major subject. As a result, there is a need for the use of strategies, which improve students' academic performance as well as confidence in effective communication. In this regard, strategies such as group work or cooperative learning would be invaluable in fostering mastery of the requisite competencies.

This paper sought to explore the extent to which study groups enhance university level learning or communication in English as a second language, in a South African context where eleven languages are officially recognised. Therefore, literature on learning theories and benefits of study groups were reviewed so that an insight is gained on the strategies aimed at enhancing students' communication, including academic performance.

The importance of learning theories includes the understanding regarding how people learn in social environments and enlighten teachers to create active learning environments. In that respect Vygotsky (1962) and Haley (2016) postulate that learning takes place through interactions and communications with others. They emphasise that immediate physical contexts influence the learning process and that students learn through interaction and communication with peers, teachers and professional others. Vygotsky (1962) further advises that teachers should create a learning context which makes full use of the learners' ability to communicate with others through conversations, teamwork and feedback. However, his argument is that culture is a principal determining factor for knowledge building. For instance, people in general learn through the cultural lens by inter-relating with peers influenced by the capabilities shaped by their culture. Nevertheless, second language (L2) students at institutions of higher learning do not necessarily depend on their culture to master certain subjects such as English. In the South African setting, it is rare to come across what one may call custodians of the English culture as there are eleven official

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languages with each having its own distinctive culture.

Vygotsky (1962) attests that language is the central instrument that stimulates thinking, improves intellectual capabilities, and develops educational activities like reading and writing. Therefore, teaching strategies which increase the sharing of expert information where students collaborate to make study investigations, share the findings, and come up with a final project resulting in a collaborative community are of great importance. Thus, from this perspective the value of group work cannot be discounted.

The current paper sought to explore the value of group work among female third-year level English student teachers, who had unpleasant experiences relating to early marriage and/or teenage pregnancy which compelled them to drop out of school. Although Duval (1993) asserts that dropout occurs mainly in the first year of college / university, the respondents dropped out of schools at various levels. Nevertheless, the dropout respondents share some of the common traits generally associated with school dropouts worldwide. These include, among others, poor or below-average marks, dissatisfaction with their courses and changing them often, devoting less time to their studies, lack of concentration, poor study methods coupled with ill-discipline, and are, therefore, often absent from classes. Furthermore, they experience problems in balancing work schedules, writing of assignments and submitting them on time, seem less motivated, have a tendency of not requesting assistance from lecturers, complain of receiving insufficient support from their peers, and experience problems preparing for examinations. In addition, the returnee students experience the extra burden of family responsibilities, such as looking after their children and being heavily involved in other household chores. It is in light of these challenges faced by female university returnees that the paper seeks to explore the potential benefits of group work for this type of students.

Literature Review

Group Work Defined

As a concept, group work is described by different authors using a variety of terminologies such as collaborative learning, cooperative

learning, collaborative work, cooperative work, collaborative group work, and study teams (Hoffman and Mercer 2016). In the current paper these terms will be used interchangeably.

Anthony (2005) defines cooperative learning or group work as an effective instruction approach where few groups, composed of learners of various proficiency levels, use a number of learning activities in order to develop their learning. Each member of a group is accountable for what is learnt and taught as well as giving assistance to fellow team mates, by so doing creating an environment of success. Even higher proficiency learners may benefit from lower proficiency students when reporting back (Yu and Hu 2017). It can be used for learners from Grades 2-12, and is similarly effective for any subject, theme or level. Haylock's (1991) classroom based research revealed that the strategy can be useful and applicable for learners of the ages of 13 and 15. However, group work cannot be confined to a certain age group, because it is relevant to and used by people from all walks of life and for different purposes.

Principles of Group Work

Principles of collaborative group work comprise learning techniques which engage learners in active learning, encouraging them not to be fully dependent on the educator or lecturer but rely on their capability both as individuals and as members of a team so that they can think and pursue knowledge from additional sources.

Various studies have indicated that small group collaborations can be an effective way of sharing knowledge. The teaching strategy based on small teams assists students to collaborate and capitalise on their own and each other's knowledge (Johnson and Johnson 1993). Furthermore, it should be borne in mind that cooperative learning does not only entail requesting students to team up ; instead, serious consideration goes into assisting students to utilise their experiences fruitfully (Jacobs et al. 2002). The use of small groups is an instructional strategy that can be very effective for ESL learners provided the teacher can motivate learners to communicate in a favourable and relaxed setting. In such groups students are at ease to pose questions or seek clarifications and promote a helpful support system related to enhanced students' proficiency (Thienhuong 2006). In that

context, small groups allow the students to create their own environment where they maximise their learning potential in a friendlier environment that does not inhibit them.

Additionally, the strategy can be useful in managing overcrowded lecture halls as it gives the lecturer an opportunity to deal with large classes comprised of different student needs more successfully. In order to address the issue of overcrowded classes it is vital for lecturers to think of small group arrangement as a teaching strategy which is relevant for some learning objectives, and as an approach which functions better with other organisational provisions, comprising whole class instruction (Webb et al. 1995). Effective teaching encourages paired group work, which is monitored and not as a way of getting a break from teaching students. Barnes (2006) encourages the use of small group work because it offers opportunities for teacher evaluation, occasions for learners to implement collaboration; introvert learners to have the opportunity to observe more proficient learners struggling to solve certain learning problems, besides, decision-making in a group helps the articulation of reasoning and improvement of knowledge. Quite often it is not possible for lecturers to monitor effectively all the students' progress. Moreover, time allocated for lectures is not enough for lecturers and students to cover all components of the lesson or module. Therefore, students who take charge of their learning come up with own innovative strategies such as creating study teams to help them succeed.

Benefits of Group Work

Of great relevance to this paper is the fact that group work is considered an important learning tool at higher institutions of learning (Elgort et al. 2008). Burke (2011) in his research findings concurs that students perform and apply knowledge better when they are part of a group as compared to working as individuals. Therefore, students who form personal study groups achieve a profound understanding of the aspect covered in class including the development of skills such as writing and oral communication. In this regard, Wright and Lawson (2005) and Rahmadani (2017) confirm that group work motivates students to devote time preparing themselves through reading for class because it is thought-provoking and inspiring.

In addition, Chickering and Gamson (1997) indicate that learning is improved when it is regarded as a group effort than an individual work. Collaborative learning usually increases involvement in learning; as a result, better learning is comparable to better work because it is interactive and social rather than competitive and isolated. Interacting and sharing ideas with others enhances intellectual skills and develops understanding. Chen et al. (2008) have positively related group work to the quality of the learning experience, asserting that it is a significant manner to assist students gain knowledge in teamwork and improve essential skills including critical thinking, self-reflection, and co-construction of knowledge.

Rahaman (2014) confirms that group work provides opportunities for English Second Language (ESL) learners to improve proficiency in a lively and meaningful way through working with different groups of peers such as pairings, companions, small teams, including conferencing. ESL learners or students can observe diverse socio-cultural language and behaviours demonstrated in a multiplicity of meaningful contexts. As a result, group work is viewed as an aspect of co-operative learning, which provides real life communication and peer learning opportunity.

On the other hand, the education system recognises group work as one of the learning strategies and/or teaching strategies which yields good results. It benefits both the facilitators and the learners/students. It should be borne in mind that cooperative learning does not only entail merely expecting students to work together in groups; instead, sensible thought and focus goes into assisting students make the experience worthwhile (Jacobs et al. 2002; Akapan and Beard 2016). In the L2 classroom where communication is the main outcome, group work is crucial because it reconstructs the physical setting of communication; learners are placed in a personal relationship position in which interaction and cooperation enhances learning (British Council 2013). As a learning or teaching strategy, group work is used to alleviate workload in large classes; in some instances students themselves form study groups in order to share knowledge freely amongst themselves without being pressurised by the presence of the facilitator (Patel 2013). It is therefore, likely that students who rely on group work as a study method bene-

fit from sharing information with knowledgeable others.

Among the benefits of group work is the fact that co-operative teams are long lasting groups with established association whose major responsibility is to give members support, inspiration, and encouragement to complete module requirements and tasks. Collaborative team members share information about lectures and assignments when one has missed a session. The bigger the class and the more difficult the subject matter, the more important group work can be (Chickering and Gamson 1997). Therefore, it is important for students to form study teams or groups in which they can exchange opinions or ideas freely, something that most students would not find easy to do in a large class.

According to Lee (2014), the conversations that team members hold with their peers without interruptions by the facilitator develop communication practice. As students have control over their learning they can discuss any topic and solve any problem not necessarily relating to the subject. The students' participation in the group boosts their confidence and offer them a sense of belonging as they are able to exchange feelings, ideas and thoughts (Tuan and Nhu 2010; Hart 2016). One of the ways in which ESL students learn the English language is through the environment which offers free interaction amongst students.

Students learn best when presented with an opportunity which encourages them to be actively involved in the learning process (Collier 1980). Some researchers report that, irrespective of how difficult the subject matter is, students who collaborate probably learn more of what is taught and remember it longer than when the same content is taught using traditional teaching methods. Students who work in cooperative teams also seem to be more content with their lectures because they are better prepared. Over and above being prepared, students are in a position to challenge ideas of other students or those presented in readings or by the facilitator. Consequently, the interaction amongst students enhances and develops English language learning and social skills and therefore maximising interaction in the classroom (Ontario Ministry of Education 2005).

Furthermore, qualitative surveys have revealed that additional significant and often un-

measured outcomes beyond enhanced general success can result from small group problem-solving, followed by whole class discussions for the whole year. It was found that the method produced several learning opportunities which do not usually take place in traditional classrooms, such as opportunities for collaborative dialogue and resolution of opposing points of view (Wright 1999; Vaughn et al. 2001). Nonetheless, research revealed positive effects of small teams as compared to large teams on cross-ethnic relations and learners' attitudes towards school (Slavin 1983; McKinney 2010). It is therefore, imperative that students form small study groups so that each person should find an ample opportunity for meaningful participation.

Based on the experiences of the majority of classroom teachers, the following are some of the advantages of group work (Anthony 2005):

- ♦ The results on student achievements are positive and life-long, irrespective of the level or difficulty of the subject matter.
- ♦ Students do not think of dropping out of school, for the reason that their inputs are solicited, valued and celebrated.
- ♦ One of the greatest benefits is that students who collaborate with others are also likely to appreciate and depend on each other. This normally happens among members of diverse cultural groups.
- ♦ Interactions between learners with learning disabilities and other learners in class can also develop radically.
- ♦ The strategy offers more opportunities for problem solving skills and students demonstrate important development in these skills.
- ♦ Learners improve their oral communication skills with members of their peer groups and their social skills are enhanced.
- ♦ It also addresses the over-crowded classroom as learners learn in a group which is the major stumbling block in effective teaching and learning.

Arias and Garcia (2013) advise that learning through collaboration can assist teachers in managing circumstances such as creating a learning community where all students take part in a cooperative atmosphere, taking risks, getting opportunities to be exposed to a social context and improving interpersonal relations among team members provided the teacher creates a motivational context. It can be argued that group work does not only succeed through teacher efforts but by the group members themselves

who have a need to accomplish a particular assignment.

Problem Statement

Most undergraduate English major student teachers register for the module without the adequate competence and background knowledge to cope with English as a major subject at the university level. Consequently, many students are unable to attain the necessary standards expected of English major students such as the appropriate use of tenses, sentence construction and effective interpretation or analysis of literary texts. The challenge is compounded particularly for returnee students who for various reasons have spent years away from the academic environment. This gives rise to a need for the use of strategies which improve students' academic performance as well as confidence in effective communication. In this regard, strategies such as group work or cooperative learning would be invaluable in fostering the mastery of the requisite competencies.

Objectives

The objective of the paper was to evaluate if returnee female student teachers involved in group work or study teams improve their academic performance in English. Aligned to this objective, was the need to explore how and how much study groups operate to improve university level learning or communication in English as a second language, in a South African context where eleven languages are officially recognized.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The research design for this paper is a qualitative survey characterised by purposive sampling. Although all the respondents had an equal opportunity to participate, the researchers sampled English third level student teachers who had a consistent record of being in study groups for at least two years.

Population and Setting

The study was conducted in one of the South African universities where all the students

are English Second Language speakers. The university is situated in a rural area where the practice of early marriage is still prevalent and therefore most young female students find themselves either married or as teen mothers. For this reason, these students tend to be withdrawn, which may impact adversely on their academic performance. The population comprised of 20 third-year village residents female returnee L2 student teachers majoring in English. They all experienced difficulties in their first year of English study as they had dropped out of school for some time after Grade 12 due to marriage and children rearing. The average age of the respondents was 28 years.

Sampling

Purposive sampling was used to select respondents for the paper; only returnee female student teachers married with children and teen mothers who were part of study groups were considered. In that regard, the researchers interviewed 20 of those students who were willing to participate.

Research Instrument

The data collection instrument for this paper was an interview schedule with structured questions based on the benefits of a study group. In addition, mobile phones were used for the accurate recording of the responses.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data collection process for the paper involved setting up two appointments with the participants. The first appointment entailed explaining the purpose of the research to the participants, seeking their permission, outlining the ethical considerations and agreeing on the date for the actual interviews. During the interviewing process, questions were read out to each individual respondent and the responses were recorded on the interview schedule and mobile phones by the researchers.

Data analysis encompassed the following steps: arranging data into different benefits of group work; reading through all the data in the interview schedule to obtain a general sense of the views of the respondents on participation in group work and to reflect on these views. The

next step involved interpreting data from the mobile phone recordings, in order to get a clear sense of the recorded responses. Subsequently, the views appeared as major findings which reflected multiple perspectives regarding group work from individual participants.

Ethical Considerations

The researchers obtained permission to conduct research from the participants themselves because they were adult mothers who could make own decisions. Informed consent was sought from the respondents and they were told that the research was for the purpose of publication. Although the participants expressed concern about confidentiality, the researchers upheld this principle throughout. Aligned to this principle, the respondents were not subjected to any harm or any untoward behavior.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The aim of the paper was to assess if ESL student teachers who academically struggle with English do improve proficiency after being involved in group work or team work. The interviews for returnee female student teachers were based on the questions relating to whether there is any meaningful learning through interaction with other students or not, whether students have control over the learning situation or not, whether their confidence in the classroom has improved or not, whether there is a social context in learning or not and whether they were encouraged to engage in healthy competition or not including the benefits of added motivating learning environment.

Meaningful Learning through Interaction

The majority of the respondents interviewed regarding meaningful learning in a group indicated that they found group work helpful, because it raised their consciousness on the amount of work they were required to cover. They explained that others instilled in them a positive competitive spirit which compelled them to make positive contributions during the discussions. As a result, they had to study harder when alone in order to avoid dependency on others. There was that feeling that if they did not contribute it would appear as if they were

not serious about their academic work. The finding supports the assertion by Vygotsky (1962) and Haley (2016) that students learn better through interaction and communication with peers. As the groups were formed on the basis of age and time wasted when they had dropped out of school for marriage and child rearing therefore they had to do their best. However, one respondent indicated that she found that there was too much talking going on and that disturbed her and she resorted to verifying what was discussed by studying harder on her own. She decided that she would talk less and listen more for fear of sharing correct information and being misled by those who talked too much.

Student Control over Learning Situation

The general view from the respondents was that they found the group discussions quite beneficial in the sense that they helped to close the knowledge gap that existed prior to the group sessions. As the students allocated different tasks to one another ensuring that all the areas of focus were covered, that encouraged them to take control over the learning situation. The finding is in support of what Akapan and Beard (2016) and Rahmadani (2017) found, which is that collaborative work encourages students to be disciplined in focusing on their academic work through reading and/or studying. Two of the respondents, however had reservations on the control that group members exerted on the group discussions. They cited instances where some members of the discussion group derailed the process by constantly questioning the inputs of others. Although Duval (1993) contends that former dropouts devote less time to their studies, lack concentration, work strategies and self-discipline, however, the two respondents indicated that when they had misgivings about group members who were disruptive, they resorted to verifying what was discussed by studying harder on their own. On the other hand, there were group members who offered insignificant contribution and resorted to being the discussion group's scribes. Although the group discussion improves control over the learning situation, lack of commitment by some devalues the effectiveness of the group discussions.

Student Teachers' Confidence Improved

All the respondents confirmed that the group discussions helped them improve their confi-

dence in expressing themselves in English, when sharing their opinions and in challenging the opinions of others. They also indicated that they found it easier to participate in class where there were many students. Ten of the respondents revealed that they were unable to air their views or respond in class during their first year of university study, citing shyness and lack of confidence, but after having several group discussions they realised that they could make contributions in any situations. In particular, they had become confident enough to make individual presentations, give report back and engage in classroom debates. On the other hand, the two who were competent even before they had participated in group work activities revealed that they became more competent in the classroom and beyond, for instance they felt confident expressing themselves in students' mass gatherings. The findings are in line with the opinions of Tuan and Nhu (2010) and Hart (2016) that students' participation in group work enhances their confidence as they have an opportunity to exchange feelings, ideas and thoughts. Therefore, it became evident that indeed mini-presentations and report back on what they had prepared helped them improve their confidence.

Provision of Appropriate Social Context for Learning

All the respondents confirmed that group work has other benefits apart from academic development. The sixteen respondents who were married found the group sessions useful in that they offered them the platform to share their marriage (and other social) experiences with others. They reported feeling comfortable talking about their relationships with their husbands, children and in-laws. They particularly assisted each other with ideas on how to conduct their family affairs. However, the other four unmarried respondents reported feeling initially uncomfortable with sharing experiences relating to their personal lives. Nonetheless, they indicated that as time went on they felt comfortable talking about their children as well as the relationships which did not work out with their husbands. The views by these respondents confirm the findings by Thienhuong (2006) that study groups provide a positive support system for learning. On the other hand, Arias and Garcia (2013) assert that group work creates a

learning community where all students take part in a meaningful environment. So effectively, the group work sessions did not only provide a platform for academic achievement but turned out to be therapeutic for all members involved. They even reported improved levels of concentration after realising that the experiences some of them were going through were not dissimilar to those of other members.

Fostering of Healthy Competition and Added Stimulating Learning Environment

It emerged from the findings that all the respondents developed a healthy competitive spirit which enhanced their contributions in class. Flowing from the group discussions the respondents were confident enough and had better command of the English language, with enhanced vocabulary, to engage with and challenge the views of other students in class. In the process it became evident that the group discussions had helped them develop higher levels of reasoning which meant that they would not simply accept opinions of other students without challenging the questionable aspects. This finding is consistent with the views by Vygotsky (1962) that the distribution of expert knowledge where students collaborate stimulates thinking and develops reasoning. For that matter, the participants reported more interest and excitement in classroom discussions, which had the added advantage of benefitting other students as well. Moreover, findings by Chickering and Gamson (1997) and Yu and Hu (2017) indicate that learning is improved when it is a group effort than an individual work, further pointing out that group work is cooperative and social, not competitive and isolated. Ultimately the resultant healthy competition decreased opportunities for failure, lack of focus and helplessness in the learning environment.

CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that group work indeed has benefits for students; it is a useful strategy that enhances students' communication and academic performance. Although the research was conducted among university returnee female student teachers whose performance was previously unsatisfactory, the participants revealed that they experienced an upsurge in En-

glish language communication and proficiency following their involvement in study teams. Furthermore, it emerged that regular participation in collaborative study helped the students to attain the necessary standard expected of English major students, such as effective communication and mastery of the requisite competencies. It was also revealed from the findings that the mastery of such competences in the target language (L2) improved students' confidence particularly when participating in classroom discussions, debates, presentations as well as mass meetings. The study groups were also used as an avenue for social interaction where members shared their personal experiences, thus the groups served multiple purposes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Flowing from the study findings, the researchers recommend group work as an essential learning strategy for all students. To this effect, it is further recommended that lecturers should formalise the creation of the study groups, ensuring that all students realize that inasmuch as individual work is an absolute necessity, group work is beneficial to all participants.

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