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## WAYS OF ENGAGING FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS IN DISCUSSIONS THROUGH SMALL GROUP WORK

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**Abstract.** The article deals with the techniques of how to involve university first-year students in speaking using the activities for small groups. The experiment was carried out at Vasyl Stefanyk Precarpathian National University with the freshmen of the Department of Foreign Languages. The focus of the research was on speaking skills as they are considered to play a significant role in enhancing students' communicative competence. The experiment is of high methodological value as it was based on two types of studying, namely online and in class. The aim of developing speaking skills is threefold. It is a splendid opportunity to practice real-life communication. Any speaking activity can be provided feedback, which will make learners understand the level, progress, and language difficulties they face. The teacher's productive feedback can evoke students' great satisfaction from a speaking activity and positively influence their wish to take part in the discussion. It is crucial to find the most suitable ways to help learners speak English fluently and adjust methods and techniques how to engage them in speaking activities. To carry out the experiment qualitative and quantitative methods were used successfully. The observation was selected to do the qualitative research, namely for observing the learners' participation during their work in small groups, which were selected as a means of conducting speaking activities in the class. The quantitative method in this research was represented by two questionnaires. The purpose of them was to find out students' attitudes toward this kind of work before and after the experiment. The overall results proved to be positive and the experiment confirmed the hypothesis that engaging students in small group work could contribute to their greater participation in discussion activities. The data of the observation and questionnaires revealed that the learners felt more confident in small teams and they understood some responsibility for their work.

**Keywords:** small group work, motivation, group discussion, qualitative and quantitative methods.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Speaking skills have become a central issue for teachers in EFL classes as speaking plays an important role in developing learners' communicative competence. According to Harmer (2001), there are three major reasons for having students speak in English classes. First, it is a good opportunity to practice real-life communication. Secondly, feedback can be provided for any speaking task that will contribute greatly to learners' understanding of their level, progress, and language problems they are experiencing. Besides, if a teacher gives sympathetic and useful feedback, students will get tremendous satisfaction from it and this cannot but positively influence their desire to participate in speaking activities. As a result, the more students speak English in

class, the more automatic their use of the language becomes, which makes the third reason why speaking in ESL classes is important.

Speaking is a complex activity and it is of great importance that learners feel confident when they participate in speaking activities. It is essential to take great effort continually to find the best ways to help learners speak English fluently and adjust methods and techniques how to involve them in speaking activities, namely discussion.

Making students speak is not an easy task. To do this, speaking activities should be extremely engaging for the learners. Small group work gives learners more speaking time, allows them to feel safer when participating in discussions especially shy students as they mix with everyone in the group, and gives them a possibility to brainstorm more ideas and thus practice more language. This maximizes their talking time and minimizes the teacher's talking. Taking this into consideration, the aim of the research is to discover the ways of engaging first-year students in discussions through small group work.

## 2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

While observing the students' work in their English classes it was noticed that in most cases, they were reluctant to take part in speaking activities, namely discussions. They spoke up only when the teacher asked them to. Besides, their answers were short; they used simple sentences, sometimes even just separate words to speak. They lacked motivation and confidence. They preferred to do grammar and reading activities. The only speaking activity they did not mind was learning a short text or dialogue by heart, which is something that does not require unprepared speaking.

One more problem with nowadays studying is online lessons. Both teachers and students face challenges, which demand searching for new productive ways to provide meaningful interaction (Harsch et al., 2021; Tao & Gao, 2022). Using IT in language learning can have a twofold effect. On the one hand, it is of great asset to teachers and students, and on the other hand, it may cause extra anxiety (Bilyk et al., 2020; Egbert, 2020). It was an additional obstacle to volunteering students to speak due to some technical issues. Some students spoke too quietly and it was difficult to hear them, some had problems with microphones and Internet connection and all this discouraged them from speaking. Moreover, it was difficult for the teacher to control a speaking activity due to the lack of visual contact and the ability to see and hear everybody. The only successful technique in this situation was to ask a concrete student to answer, but in this case, the nature of the discussion was partially lost and it was always teacher-led.

A good way to try to solve the problem was to conduct a small group discussion. Small group work is considered a good opportunity for the learners to get involved in speaking. This mode of work gets students to interact with each other and collaborate to complete given tasks. In this research, the following hypothesis is developed: involving students in small group work will contribute to their greater participation in discussion activities. Some issues must be considered before having students work in groups. First, the number of learners in one group, then the way they can be split into teams, the time for such activities, and the way to monitor students. Taking this into consideration the research question is as follows: what are the challenges and benefits of small group discussions in first-year students' classes?

A large and growing body of literature has investigated the necessity of group work in foreign language classes. According to Broughton (2003), it is crucial that a learner can "produce naturally the language which has been presented to him and which he has practiced in various more or less controlled situations". With many students in class, it is recommended to divide the class into groups so that a number of parallel discussions can take place. In this way, more students get an

opportunity to speak (Gower & Walters, 1983). At the stage of freer production, namely discussion, group work is considered a helpful tool since there must be less control on a teacher's part and more student-centeredness.

Harmer (2001) reaches the conclusion that group work can provoke greater involvement and participation than whole-class work. There are several reasons for this. First, there can be different opinions and varied contributions to a common goal and it gives a greater number of students a chance to speak (Lavery, 2010). It also allows learners to make their own decisions without being told what to do or say by teachers, thus promoting learner autonomy. Besides, it helps develop cooperation and negotiation skills. Speaking about students' attitudes towards group work it is stated that the learners mostly find group work to be enjoyable, interesting, and interaction-promoting (Nair et al., 2012).

### 3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVE, METHODOLOGY, AND DATA

The general context for the research is two groups of first-year students. Each group consists of 28 students, 56 in total. The language level of the learners is from intermediate to upper-intermediate. Concerning English learning styles, most of the students are visual and they learn best with the help of visual aids. Data collection followed the appropriate ethical procedures and received approval from the students.

The two main methods of collecting data used in the research are a qualitative method and a quantitative one (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). As this was an evaluation study, qualitative and quantitative tools were used for measurement. The observation was chosen to do the qualitative research. While observing the learners' work during lessons it was noticed that they were reluctant to participate in speaking activities and did this only when the teacher asked them by names. One of the reasons for not being willing to speak was to make mistakes and to get a bad mark for their answer. Besides it was apparent that all speaking tasks were either to answer the questions after a text, retell a story, or role-play a dialogue from the textbook, which students usually prepared at home as a part of their homework. This was when small group work was selected as a means to conduct speaking activities in the class. Before doing this, it was necessary to find out students' attitudes toward this kind of work. For this purpose, a questionnaire was designed which represented the quantitative method in this research. The purpose of this questionnaire was to reveal how often the learners used to work in small groups when at school, whether they liked this kind of work, and their thoughts about the cooperation between the members of groups (see Appendix A). This tool was chosen because it is one of the most practical and feasible ways to collect data. The questionnaire was anonymous because in such a way students' answers would be fair and they would not feel any fear or pressure.

The next stage was to select and adapt speaking activities for small group work. Tasks should involve discussion to develop speaking skills. It is necessary to admit that during online studying it was a challenge for the teacher to work with discussion activities online as the nature of the discussion was lost and there was no opportunity for all students to speak. That is why small group work was a good way out to engage the learners in speaking simultaneously. Secondly, it was a good chance for the students to stop worrying about making mistakes and getting bad marks as the focus of such a mode of work is to get them to speak paying more attention to developing fluency rather than accuracy.

Communicative activities are designed to be lively and interactive. When students feel comfortable, they are likely to learn more. An active, cooperative class is a class where a great deal of cultural and linguistic learning is present. Here is a set of activities conducted with the first-year students.

*Story making.* The students were split into 3 groups and each team got a picture of a festival and a card with a short piece of information about this festival (any pictures can be chosen depending on the topic of the lesson. In our case, it was The World Around Us). The student's task was to imagine that they were one person in the picture and they had to describe everything they saw, heard, and felt as if they were that person. They could refer to the text they had in their Student's Book to get some ideas.

*Designing an interview.* Before the students were split into 3 groups, they discussed the cartoon everybody watched. Then each team was offered to opt for one of the main characters from the animated film and create as many questions as possible to ask their character. The students were limited in time and warned that the team that would make the most questions would win. This engaged the learners in active discussion and work that is more efficient. After working in small groups, a whole class speaking activity was conducted – the students addressed their questions to people from the opposite teams asking them to answer the questions as if they were the target character.

*Discussing films.* The students were split into 3 groups and each team got a set of cards with titles of 3-4 films (depending on the number of team members). Their task was to choose one film they would watch together at the weekends. Each member of the team tried to persuade others to choose the film he or she selected.

The observation was another research tool to examine the learners' participation in small group work activities. To evaluate the success of the experiment it was crucial to observe the work of groups. It is difficult to capture the situation only through questionnaires. Observations provide immediate information needed in the study and the learners' behavior while engaging in the activities was observed (see sample in Appendix B). That is why monitoring was selected which is considered one of the best roles of a teacher during small group work. Monitoring is when teachers watch and listen to students while they are doing an activity, without leading them in that activity. The teachers can then assess what the students are doing well or where they have problems. Getting students in the classroom to work in small groups requires a different approach from other ways of working in the classroom such as whole-class teaching.

One of the effective things recommended by Chris Stephens and Rosalyn Hyde (2013) is really listening to what students say, before offering help, as "careful listening allows the teacher to identify the nature of the student's problem and it provides a rationale to offer appropriate and suitable support". When working in a classroom a teacher is advised to take a back seat or wander the room, lose eye contact, listen carefully to some group, and interfere only when there is an urgent need. It is of great importance to listening for errors that you know a student can correct him or herself. Then a teacher can gently remind the student how to use that language properly. One way to gauge the success of a class for English language learners is to observe how much or how little the students are depending on the teacher. The more learners are working independently, in pairs, or in small groups, the more successful the class is. Online study monitoring can be provided by joining breakout rooms and observing learners' work. Doing like this a teacher has an opportunity to visit all groups of students at different stages noting down some issues concerning their work, namely participation, use of English, and cooperation. A teacher can also spot some problems the learners have with grammar or vocabulary but the most important thing is their speaking itself.

In order to understand whether the group work was effective from the point of view of the learners, one more questionnaire was designed and conducted at the end of the experiment (see Appendix C). The questions were designed to find out what the students' thought about small group work and they felt during it. Therefore, the questions were focused on students working in a team, communication in English, interaction among the team members, and their enthusiasm, engagement as well as motivation when working in small groups.

So, the data of this research were collected mainly by the use of questionnaires which included open-ended and closed-ended questions and teachers' observing the students during their group work.

#### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Before the experiment, a general picture of my students' attitude to small group work was needed. Besides, it would help to find out some pitfalls waiting for the teachers. To find out if the learners were familiar with small group work and what they thought about it a questionnaire was designed in Google Forms.

First, it was important to know if the students had worked in small groups before. The answers to the first question *How often do you work in groups during English classes?* came out to be controversial as all three options *often, sometimes, never* were chosen. Still, the majority selected *sometimes*, which indicates that students were familiar with this kind of work. The *never* option got 10% which may mean that this student either was absent from class when this work was done or misunderstood the question. The answers to these questions meant that it wouldn't be difficult for students to understand how to work in small groups and it wouldn't take me a lot of time to explain what it is.

The next question showed the learners' attitude to working in small groups and most students answered that they liked it. At least there were no negative responses. It meant that this kind of work was suitable for them and could engage them in the discussion.

The relations in class often influence the sufficiency of work, that is why the following questions *Do you prefer to work in different groups or in the same one every time?* and *Would you like to select your own group members to work in the group yourself?* were offered. The option *in the same group* got 80% and *Yes, I would like* also to get 80%. The second result resonates with the first one and it could mean that by answering these questions the learners had their friends in mind with whom it was easy for them to work.

The learners strongly agreed that everyone in the group should have an equal opportunity to participate (100%) and that group members should help each other (100%) which supported the idea of having small group work for involving them in discussion as their answers indicated that they were ready to cooperate.

Another question was aimed to find out if the students knew how to make their work in teams efficient and how to use the given time effectively. The results showed that only half of the learners agreed that it is necessary to distribute responsibilities among the group members. Still, there were no negative answers that could mean that subconsciously the learners were ready to have some responsibility while working together.

The last question in the questionnaire was *Do you agree that working in groups increases students' self-confidence?* The result was quite positive – 90% of the respondents who chose the option *strongly agree*, which showed students' positive attitude toward this kind of work. Still, there were 3 students who selected the option to *disagree*, but it can be assumed that either these students did not like to participate in discussions or just did not understand the meaning of the words in the question.

During the observation, the focus was on the student's participation in discussions and their cooperation (asking for clarification, responding to questions, and helping other members of the team). Besides special attention was paid to the fact of how often and in what cases the students used Ukrainian to speak. The latter is of great importance as the main aim of any speaking activity in English classes is to help students develop their English-speaking skills and to diminish the usage of their mother tongue.

During the first group work (Story making) not all students were willing to participate. Some students spoke only after they were asked to. Some of them kept silent and just listened to the others talking. Almost everybody used Ukrainian words and sentences from time to time.

The results of the second and the third observations were better and it was noticed that the students were more active and everybody participated in the discussion – somebody more, somebody less. A good tendency was that almost nobody kept silent. Still, some students used Ukrainian, especially when they wanted to convince others and say something funny.

After all, activities involving group work had been conducted, the students got one more questionnaire which would help understand if the experiment was successful and what aspects should be considered in teaching.

First, the students had to answer how much they liked working in their small groups. Most of them really enjoyed it (70%) and some (30%) chose the option *It was neither good nor bad*. It can be concluded that this kind of work was suitable for these learners as nobody chose *I did not enjoy the option*.

Besides, the students also liked the tasks they were doing in groups – most learners said they really liked them and few chose *They were just ok*, again there were no negative responses.

To find out how the learners cooperated while working in teams they were asked the following questions: *Did your team members help you when you didn't understand something?* and *When I did not understand a task, I ...* The answers to these questions showed that the relations between the classmates are good as the options *Yes, always* (the former question) and *asked my team members* (the latter question) were the most popular among the responders making up 60% and 50% respectively.

The question *On a scale from one to five, circle how you felt during the work group* is closely connected with the previous two and reflects students' overall feelings. The majority of the respondents chose the maximum point. Numbers 1 and 2 were not chosen and the results show students' positive attitude towards group work.

To see if the observation data concerning learners' participation were reliable the question *How often did you speak when you worked in groups?* was placed. A good tendency is that the number of students chose the answer *I tried to do it as often as possible*.

It is natural that the students spoke Ukrainian from time to time, but still teachers want them to do this as rarely as possible. Teachers' ultimate goal is to have learners speak only English in English classes. So, the following questions were included in the questionnaire: *Did you speak only English when you worked in groups?* and *In what cases did you use Ukrainian?* The majority chose the option *Sometimes I spoke Ukrainian*. To find out the reasons for the question *In what cases did you use Ukrainian?* was included in the questionnaire. The majority of students selected the option *When I did not know the words in English*. Still, some students answered that they did not speak Ukrainian, which proves that they are really interested in English and they trying to improve in all possible ways, besides their level of English allowing them to speak only English.

The last question was purely open-ended to find out the learners' attitudes to group work. The answers were short but mostly positive: *I liked the tasks very much; I want to work in teams; Everything is ok; Thank you; I liked working in teams/groups*.

The interpretations of the results will be presented in the following section.

## 5. INTERPRETATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The interpretation of the main findings is organized around the two main research questions, which will be discussed in turn.

First, challenges could occur while the students worked in groups. As presented earlier in the

methodology section, a questionnaire was designed to understand what possible pitfalls were. There were no problems with explaining to students what group work is as it became clear from their answers that they were familiar with this kind of work.

According to the answers, the learners preferred to work in the same group, so to make them feel more confident their wish was taken into consideration and they worked in the same groups. In fact, there were only positive results of this as students quickly understood who could do what, and every time their work became more effective – they distributed roles at the beginning and were happy to perform them, which saved them time when they had the next group work. Besides, according to the results of the second questionnaire, the learners felt comfortable while working in teams. Though it was clear that it was not the best way to have students work in the same groups all the time as they had to develop their communication and cooperative skills, which is possible when you interact with as many different people as you can. So, a suggested way out would be to let the learners work in the same groups several times in a row (2-3 times), then change them, and so on.

The next challenge was how to make their group work effectively in terms of cooperation as according to the questionnaire only 5 out of learners thought that it was necessary to distribute the responsibilities among the group members. So, to avoid possible misunderstanding and chaos, it was explained to the learners that their teamwork would be more effective if they performed certain roles, for example, writing down all the ideas, keeping the time, being the presenter, or reminding others to stick to English. The students quickly understood this and eagerly distributed responsibilities. It must be admitted, however, that the student whose level of English was a bit lower and who did not participate in the discussions perfectly performed the role of a timekeeper.

While observing students' first group work the teacher noticed that some of them did not take part in the discussion and when she interfered and asked why they kept silent they answered that they could make many mistakes and get bad marks. Thus, to engage such students in speaking everybody was informed that more attention would be paid to their participation and giving ideas rather than mistakes. The teacher also advised the learners to ask each other for help if there was something not clear and to use the words and ideas from their textbooks as the activities were based on the topic they were learning. So, the following activities were more successful as almost everybody spoke, though from time to time they used Ukrainian.

One more pitfall was using Ukrainian while working in small groups. The students slid back to Ukrainian from time to time, especially when they were agitated and were eager to convince other members of the team or when they tried to say something funny to amuse everybody but their vocabulary level did not allow them to do this in English.

Despite all the challenges, the overall results were positive and the experiment proved the hypothesis that involving students in small group work will contribute to their greater participation in discussion activities. The findings of this study indicate that while working in small groups the learners participated more in discussions than while working with the whole class. The possible explanation for this could be that they felt more confident in small teams and they felt some responsibility for their work. Moreover, they understood that the teacher trusted them as from time to time they were left alone without anybody observing them. Besides, the learners really liked the activities as they were different all the time and involved a topic that was interesting for them and closely related to their lives. The answers to an open-ended question in the second questionnaire became more evidence that the working group appealed to the learners. Although comments like *I liked the tasks very much; I want to work in teams; Everything is ok; Thank you are short*, they are generally positive and would become a great motivation for any teacher.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

The experiment has led us to the conclusion that having the first-year students work in small groups contributes to increasing their participation in discussions which is an essential part of developing their speaking skills. Having conducted the research, we came up with the following recommendations that could help avoid possible difficulties and make group work more effective:

- the activities for group work must be interesting and feasible for students;
- it is necessary to explain the rules of working in teams to learners;
- time limit is important as it makes students work more effectively;
- think about the number of groups beforehand as it helps to prepare for this kind of work quicker;
- think about the way how to split learners into groups to save time and not to offend anybody;
- the teacher should take the role of an observer and try to avoid interfering in learners' work, thus minimizing teacher talking time;
- make it clear to your students that you are interested in what they are saying, not only how grammatically correct they speak;
- prepare some vocabulary (words, phrases) so that learners can use them in their discussion to minimize using their mother tongue.

The action research turned out to be successful. It showed not only that small group work contributes much to engaging the first-year students in discussing but also revealed some possible difficulties a teacher can come across while having this mode of work.

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## Appendix A

### Questionnaire 1. What is your attitude to working in groups?

Read the following questions and choose the answer.

How often do you work in groups during English classes?

- Often
- Sometimes
- Never

Do you like working in groups in English classes?

- Yes, I do
- No, I don't
- I'm not sure

Do you prefer to work in different groups or in the same one every time?

- In different groups
- In the same group

Would you like to select your own group members to work in the group yourself?

- Yes, I would like to
- No, I wouldn't
- The teacher knows better

Do you agree that the group members should help each other?

- Strongly agree
- Disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree

Is it necessary to distribute responsibilities among the group members?

- Definitely
- No
- I'm not sure

Do you agree that working in groups increases students' self-confidence?

- Strongly agree
- Disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree

## Appendix B

### Observation form (sample)

Activity 1	Story making			
	Participation	Using Ukrainian	Cooperation	Other notes
<b>Group 1</b>				
Student 1	+++	+	+++	
Student 2		++	+	Spoke only when he was asked
Student 3	+	++	+	Spoke only when he was asked

## Appendix C

### Questionnaire 2.

1. How much did you enjoy working in your small group?

- a) I really enjoyed it
- b) It was neither good nor bad
- c) I did not enjoy

2. Did your team members help you when you didn't understand something?

- a) Yes, always
- b) Sometimes
- c) Never

3. How much did you like the tasks you were given?

- a) I really liked them
- b) They were just ok
- c) I did not like them

4. How often did you speak when you worked in groups?

- a) I tried to do it as often as possible
- b) When other students asked me to say something
- c) Never

5. When I did not understand a task, I ...

- a) kept silent
- b) asked my team members
- c) asked the teacher

6. Did you speak only English when you worked in groups?

- a) Yes, I tried to speak only English
- b) Sometimes I spoke Ukrainian
- c) I spoke only Ukrainian

7. In what cases did you use Ukrainian?

- a) I did not speak Ukrainian
- b) When I did not know the words in English
- c) I cannot speak English at all
- d) other

8. On a scale from one to five, circle how you felt during work group?

Uncomfortable    1    2    3    4    5    Very comfortable

9. Other comments.

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У статті розглядаються прийоми залучення студентів першого курсу університету до мовлення за допомогою організації малих груп. Експеримент проводився в Прикарпатському національному університеті імені Василя Стефаника з першокурсниками факультету іноземних мов. Основна увага дослідження була зосереджена на мовленнєвих навичках, оскільки вважається, що вони відіграють значну роль у підвищенні комунікативної компетентності студентів. Експеримент має високу методологічну цінність, оскільки ґрунтувався на двох типах навчання, а саме онлайн та в класі. Розвиток навичок усного мовлення має потрійну мету. Це чудова можливість попрактикуватися в спілкуванні в реальному житті. Окрім того, відгук вчителя дозволить учням зрозуміти свій рівень, прогрес і те, з якими мовними труднощами вони мають справу. Продуктивний зворотний зв'язок викладача може викликати у студентів велике задоволення від мовленнєвої діяльності та позитивно вплинути на їхнє бажання брати участь у дискусії. Вкрай важливо знайти найбільш прийнятні способи допомоги учням вільно розмовляти англійською мовою та скорегувати методи та прийоми залучення їх до розмовної діяльності. Для проведення експерименту були використані якісні та кількісні методи. Спостереження стало методом моніторингу учнів під час роботи в малих групах, які були обрані як засіб розвитку мовленнєвої діяльності на уроці. Кількісний метод у цьому дослідженні був представлений двома анкетами. Їхньою метою було з'ясувати ставлення студентів до роботи в групах до та після експерименту. Загальні результати виявилися позитивними, а експеримент підтвердив гіпотезу про те, що залучення студентів до роботи в малих групах може сприяти їхній активнішій участі в дискусії. Дані спостереження та анкетування показали, що учні почуваються впевненіше в невеликих командах і розуміють певну відповідальність за свою роботу.

**Ключові слова:** робота в малих групах, мотивація, дискусія в групі, якісний та кількісний методи.