Team Work Replacing Individual Tasks
for Speedier Language Acquisition
in the ESL Classroom

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ස්වයං අධ්‍යයන ක්‍රියාවලියට හැඩගැසීම විශ්වවිද්‍යාලයීය නවක සිසුනට අභියෝගයකි. දෙ වැනි භාෂාවක් ලෙස ඉංග්‍රීසි භාෂාව ඉගැනීමේ දී පන්ති කාමරයේ සිදු කෙරෙන ඒක පුද්ගල ඉගැනුම් ක්‍රියාකාරකම් වෙනුවට කණ්ඩායම් ක්‍රියාකාරකම් යොදාගැනීම භාෂා ප්‍රවීණතාව ප්‍රගුණ කිරීම වේගවත් කරන්නේ දැ යි සොයා බැලීම මේ අධ්‍යයනයේ අරමුණ යි. විවිධ සමාජ ආර්ථීක පසුබිම් හා විවිධ ඉංග්‍රීසි භාෂා ප්‍රවීණතා මට්ටම් සහිත සිසුන් එක සීය පනහක් ඇසුරු කරගත් මේ අධ්‍යයනයේ දී ඒක පුද්ගල හා කණ්ඩායම් ක්‍රියාකාරකම් වෙන වෙන ම සිදු කරන ලදි. කාර්ය සිදු කිරීමට ගත වූ කාලය, පිළිතුරු ස්වේච්ඡාවෙන් ඉදිරි පත් කිරීම හා පිළිතුරුවල නිරවද්‍යතාව ද අධ්‍යයනය කෙරිණි. ඉගැනුම් ක්‍රියාවලියේ සමූහ ප්‍රයත්න සහිත ක්‍රියා පිළිබඳ ලද ප්‍රතිපෝෂණය ඉතා ධනාත්මක විය.

(1) Introduction and Literature Review

1.1 Two Different Learning Styles

New entrants to the university may find it challenging to adapt abruptly to the university system, its sub-culture and the focus on self-studying and research presentations. They find it quite alienating as it is completely different from the secondary school procedure that they are used to. Some students prefer studying in isolation while others prefer studying with peers as they have been practising since school. These two learning styles can be recognised in the English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom context too. This study discusses the effectiveness of adapting more teamwork in the ESL classroom rather than encouraging individual attempts at reading, writing, listening and speaking activities.

1.2 Variety in Classroom Influences Learning

According to some researchers, providing a learning environment with a variety of backgrounds, different philosophies of education and approaches to pedagogical practice can be effective in producing changes in beliefs and practices and increases the possibility of goals of student academic improvement being met.[1]

Moreover, this kind of background allows teachers to be leaders and reflective practitioners as their teaching can influence positively or negatively on English as a Second Language (ESL) learners. Enlightened by this possibility within the classroom, the researcher, also an ESL teacher, attempted to identify the effectiveness of replacing individual tasks with team work in the ESL classroom.

The studies also mention that ESL students have an alarmingly high dropout rate in language acquisition in many countries.[2] The reasons vary from personal dislike towards lessons and low competency levels. This means that the concepts and content of course work should be comprehensible and interesting to ESL learners in their classrooms.Another factor proved by a study conducted by Saravia Shore is that students from racially, ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse families and communities of lower socio-economic status tend to perform badly in language acquisition.[3] In this regard, the researcher was encouraged to form diverse groups among students allowing them to communicate with each other in order to understand their psycho-social requirements. This formation of groups let all the members feel comfortable to engage in activities in peer groups. Therefore, the researcher conducted individual and group activities while addressing the different competency levels and interests of the students.

(2) Aim of the Study

The aim of the study is to discuss the effectiveness of incorporating more team work in the ESL classroom rather than encouraging individual attempts at reading, writing, listening and speaking activities. This research questions also whether students' individual or collaborate learning style preference causes their participation at team work in the ESL classroom.

(3) Methodology

3.1 Target Group

This research focused on 150 first year undergraduates from the Faculties of Social Sciences and Humanities, representing

different socio-economic backgrounds and different competency levels in English. These 150 students attended six different classes at different time slots, but the four hour lessons designed were completed in two sessions with them and were carried out under the same conditions in terms of instructions and activities practised. Each class consisted of 20- 35 students allowing enough interaction and attention among the students and the teacher.

3.2 Focus on Language Improvement

Activities based on interaction among the students and individual activities were conducted within the classroom. Group work targeted creating a learner-friendly background in which the students were encouraged to participate in activities regardless of their competency level. This gap was minimised by encouraging all the students to express themselves.

They were allowed and even encouraged to make language errors in terms of grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary when some students hesitated to express themselves. They were allowed to use the first language if needed, but the peers had to support the speaker with expressions of English. In individual tasks, they were guided to maintain silence in the class and get the support needed either by using a dictionary or other resources including the teacher. But they were asked to exclude peers.

The researcher observed the time taken to complete tasks, the volunteering of students to share responses, and the accuracy of responses suggesting language acquisition and interest in completion of activities. At the end of the four-hour sessions, questionnaires were administered and followed with open discussions to get student opinions on teaching practices.

(4) Main Findings

A clear distinction could be seen in students' preference towards group work and they recommended group activities be adapted and given priority in the ESL classroom. Students had mentioned that focusing on individual work creates monotony in the classroom and that giving priority to teamwork distinguishes the ESL classroom from other conventional lectures where they sit and listen to the lecturers.

The analysis of answers written and spoken in the classroom stressed on the fact that free expression in which the learner is encouraged to speak and write while making language errors improves language acquisition. This freedom also brought the teacher-student and peer relationships in the classroom to a more interactive level.

Supporting the researcher's intention of creating an interactive background, Dorfman and Fisher (2002) states: "There is a mutual feeling that you're both working for the same goal. Problem solving and brainstorming take place as a partnership, rather than a teacher-imposed decision.".[4] A preference for teamwork in language learning was indicated by 100% of the participants' responses.

(5) Recommendations

This study is thus significant for highlighting the importance of having around a maximum of twenty students in the ESL classroom for better language acquisition through cooperation. This number of students in the classroom would allow the teacher to adapt more teamwork in all the four components of language learning: reading, writing, listening and speaking.

(6) Conclusion

The study revealed that the ELT classroom provides first-year undergraduates with a learner-friendly environment amidst challenging subject content and self-study requiring learning-method of their degree programme. Learning environment encouraging more interaction among teacher-students and specially student-student could be identified as a supportive factor for language acquisition. Adapting teamwork based activities in the ESL classroom thus could be identified as a factor leading to increased second language acquisition.

End Notes

[1] Dellicarpini,2008; Healey et al. 2015
[2] Dellicarpini, 2008
[3] Saravia-Shore, 2008
[4] Dorfman and Fisher, 2002

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