

CHAPTER 2. GROUP WORK AS A TOOL TO IMPROVE PARTICIPATION AND OVERCOME FEAR OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES AMONG NON-NATIVE ENGLISH SPEAKERS

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Introduction

Effective learning naturally occurs in a classroom setting where there is sharing of ideas through a two-way communication between teachers and students (Wade 1994). Yet, my experience is that even when students are required to participate, they shy away from communicating their ideas. This reluctance to speak is often caused by their fear of grammatical errors while communicating in English, which is typical for non-native English speakers. This limits immediate learning as students are unable to contribute in class.

In the quest to improve students' learning experience, I deviated from the traditional lecture-style teaching that characterised my previous classes and introduced learning through group work. In this paper, I describe and assess the impact of this innovation. I find that not only does group work increase students' participation, it also makes the class lively and improves learning outcomes as well as student communication in a second language.

Aims and theoretical underpinning of the innovation

The aim of the innovation was to increase student class participation through group work. Throughout this chapter, I use the terms *active learning* and *participation* interchangeably. By participation I mean volunteered and unsolicited responses as well as comments given, or questions asked, by students in the classroom (Burchfield and Sappington 1999; Fassinger 2000).

While the traditional mode of teaching has been characterised by a teacher playing the predominant role as a knowledge transmission agent in a class of passive students, there has been growing consensus on a better approach where the teacher plays the role of transformative agent. Approaching the job of teaching as a transformative agent allows students to actively participate in class, through interaction and knowledge sharing. Previous studies have found that the participation of students in class ensures they focus on meaning and understanding rather than on knowledge reproduction associated with passive learning (Trigwell et al. 1999; Exley and Dennick 2004). Since it has been proven that students' attention span deteriorates over time in a lecture-based class (Nilson 2014), participation in class has been found to also improve the attentiveness of students.

Notwithstanding the positives of class participation discussed in the literature, several challenges hinder students from participating. One such challenge, according to Mustapha et al. (2010), is self-limitation – a barrier an individual creates mentally or physically that limits his or her activity. Self-limitation can take the form of students staying passive in class for fear of not showing intelligence, or peer intimidation (Karp and Yoels 1976). Indeed, Wade (1994) alludes that students will only participate in class if they feel that what they have to say is important and interesting. Furthermore, students who are not native English speakers tend to participate less in class when English is the language of instruction (Kao and Gansneder 1995; Tatar 2005). Majid et al. (2010) identify class size as another factor that influences students' participation. In their view, most students may stay passive in large classes where they find it intimidating to contribute in front of a large crowd for fear of peer disapproval. Consequently, many students find it more comfortable speaking in smaller groups with their peers after first becoming familiar with them (Neer and Kircher 1989). Also, through group work, students get used to talking in class, which can positively affect their willingness to speak in front of their peers since they only need to repeat what they have already discussed in small groups.

To overcome the challenges of peer intimidation and xenoglossophobia¹, I introduced group work which I expected to serve as a preparatory ground for the students to master English terminologies with their classmates before speaking up in class. In addition, I anticipated the innovation would help overcome this challenge because having students participate in group activities provides an opportunity for reciprocal peer learning². It should also allow students to make an input to discussions and interact with peers who are also non-native English speakers. Consequently, deriving from the Popperian Principle of Falsification, I formulated null hypotheses, i.e. two statements used to test whether or not my findings confirm the findings in the literature:

H_{j0} : There will be no difference in student participation in lecture-style and activity-based classes

H_{k0} : There will be no difference in student assessment scores in lecture style and activity-based classes

Though the group work was intended to overcome the challenges resulting in non-participation, the extent to which this can be achieved is predominantly dependent on the choice of group activity. While some group activities may be appropriate for avoiding boredom, others may be apt for enhanced learning and participation. To this end, topic maps were used as the chief activity during the group work. Topic maps are visual representations of the relationship between ideas, concepts and things. They can also be a collection of topics or concepts showing relationships by associations (Exley and Dennick 2004).

1 Xenoglossophobia is the fear of foreign languages.

2 Peer learning refers to the use of teaching and learning strategies in which students learn with and from each other without the immediate intervention of a teacher. In reciprocal peer learning, students within a given cohort act as both teachers and learners (Boud et al. 2001).

Notwithstanding that topic maps have traditionally been utilised to help resolve instances of writers' block, the literature reports that topic maps can also be adapted to problem-solving (Kamble and Tembe 2013). According to the British Council (2005), topic maps allow students to see relationships between concepts. Also, topic maps have been found to work well when created in groups because they spark discussions, which helps the production of ideas and makes learning tasks livelier and more enjoyable (British Council 2005). Considering the interrelated nature of concepts in this course, the topic map technique was modified so that student groups mapped out the relationships between studied concepts in a projected word cloud.

The nature of the innovation

The innovation took place at Masaryk University in the Bachelor level course, Introduction to Theory and Management during the 2017 autumn semester, for which I served as a teaching assistant. The purpose of the course was to enhance student understanding of the processes and dynamics in organisations. The course had a total of thirteen weekly sessions. The innovation was applied in only three of these sessions because, except for these three sessions taught in English, all the other sessions were taught in the students' native language (Czech), in which I have no proficiency.

The course had thirty-two registered students who were mainly in their first and second years of study. Except for the course in which the innovation was applied, all the other courses of the students were taught in Czech. The course is compulsory for Social Policy students, but it is also open to students from other study fields. Since its introduction in 2009, the course has always been organised as lectures by both a professor responsible for the course and two assistants who are either PhD students or fresh PhD graduates. The assistants are selected based on experience having undergone the same course in the past or having researched similar topics as part of their thesis.

The innovation took the form of engaging students in group work, with a twenty-minute duration of actual group activity and presentation, for two out of the three sessions. The group dynamics included randomly-formed three or four groups³ of three to four students. While students worked in these groups, I walked around the classroom monitoring each group's discussions and encouraging student contributions. This was followed by peer feedback or questions that lasted about ten minutes. A member of each group then presented the group's work using the format of a topic map (five minutes) while the other members responded to peer feedback and questions.

Methodology

In this study, data collected through direct observation of student learning and quasi-experimental techniques were triangulated to evaluate the innovation results. Specifically, the tech-

³ The number of groups differed across class sessions due to fluctuations in student attendance.

niques included tracking the quantity of student participation, a five-minute assessment paper and assessment of the content of student contributions. The second and third course sessions were used as treatment classes while the first served as the control class in which the traditional (lecture-based) teaching was used. I made a tally to keep a record of how many students participated, i.e. contributed to discussions and asked or answered questions. To prevent instances of missing out on the tally, the class was audio recorded which I later used to check and improve the original in-class tally. I addressed each student by name during their contribution to avoid double counting, especially in instances where voices sounded similar.

Another data set included students' five-minute papers taken after each of the three classes. Students were asked to explain shortly (maximum 250 words) the threshold concepts studied in the course (public policy, organisational culture and organisational management) and apply these concepts to real-life situations (see table 1 for sample questions). Students could score up to five points (maximum) for each of the five-minute papers. Also, I assessed the quality of each group's topic map by posing questions to each group to assess their understanding of their output.

Table 1. Five-minute assessment questions used in the three innovated seminars.

| |
|---|
| First Class – 24 October 2017 |
| Think of any organisation and indicate the type of culture existing and explain your answer in not more than six sentences. |
| Second Class – 7 November 2017 |
| Think of any organization and give examples of the three types of managers and their functions in not more than ten sentences. Put in a sentence on the activities of the organisation. |
| Third Class – 14 November 2017 |
| As a manager what are the possible considerations in a situation with an employee with a negative, 'I can't do it' attitude in performance management. |

Data were analysed using cross tabulation and paired sample T-test. The choice of the T-test was based on the class size of thirty-two and the need to compare the results of the teaching innovation in both the treatment and control classes. The T-test, in general, is suitable for samples between six and fifty and for comparing means among groups (de Winter 2013).

Findings and discussion

Findings from this study (table 2) suggest that the innovation significantly improved student participation by a net difference of about 70% and also impacted positively on students' scores with a mean net difference of approximately 25%. As presented in table 2, the average score of the five-minute paper in the control class was 2.31 while that in the treatment class was 3.38 out of a maximal score of 5. Student participation frequency increased from 0.54 in the lecture-based class to 3 in the class based on group work. These values were significant at the 95% confidence level from the t-test for test scores for the control ($M = 2.308$, $SD = 1.233$) and treatment ($M = 3.826$, $SD = 0.844$) classes $t(12) = 3.590$, $p = 0.004$. Similarly, there was a significant difference at the 95% confidence level for participation frequency in the control ($M = 0.54$, $SD = 1.198$) and treatment ($M = 3$, $SD = 0.841$) classes $t(12) = 6.752$, $p = 0.000$.

Based on these findings I reject the two null hypotheses, i.e.,

H_{j0} : No difference exists in participation frequency in lecture style and activity-based classes

H_{k0} : No difference exists in assessment scores in lecture style and activity-based classes

Table 2: Differences in students' participation and before and after the innovation

| | Average Score | | Average Participation Frequency | |
|------------|---------------|------------|---------------------------------|------------|
| | Mean | Percentage | Mean | Percentage |
| Control | 2.31 | 37.6% | 0.54 | 15.2% |
| Treatment | 3.83 | 62.4% | 3.00 | 84.8% |
| Difference | 0.52 | 24.8% | 2.46 | 69.6% |

The findings are indicative that increased participation in class resulted in students focusing on meaning and understanding, which the literature associates with active learning. This contrasts with knowledge reproduction, which is associated with passive learning (Trigwell et al. 1999; Exley and Dennick 2004).

From my observation of the class, I could see students busily discussing and sharing ideas during the group work. Unexpectedly, they frequently laughed if someone chose an inappropriate English term to use. Thus, apart from improving participation and learning, the innovation was seen to have had a rippling effect on the class – it brought more fun for students. Since according to Nilson (2014) attention span deteriorates over time in class, the lively class helped maintain students' attention and curtailed the deterioration of attention span that often characterises lecture-based classes. Though the laughter during the group activity may be intimidating for some students and inhibit participation, I interpreted the situations as funny and amusing rather than

intimidating. Possibly, this was because all the students were non-native English speakers and they found it interesting to learn from their mistakes. Therefore, while this innovation worked well in a class of non-native English speakers, care must be taken when implementing it in a class with non-native English speakers in the minority.

Also, I observed all the various groups at one point seeking translations from Czech to English on the internet when they were unsure of a proper term. This served as a preparatory stage for students to improve their English terminology within their comfort zone, i.e. by discussing with their colleagues before addressing the entire class. Hence, the fear of disapproval or intimidation from colleagues, as reported, for example, by Karp and Yoels (1976), was overcome. I was therefore not surprised to see every student in the class – even those who never spoke a word to the entire class – either asking a question or contributing during the group work. Group work thus appears to have helped overcome barriers to student participation by building students' confidence.

My observation during the group presentation also evinced a thorough understanding by the students of the studied concepts. The students not only produced topic maps, which were correct, but came up with practical examples and additional concepts, which were originally not included in the projected word cloud or discussed in class. This is a clear indication that the interaction within the groups helped with the production of ideas, as suggested by practitioners (British Council 2005).

A major limitation to these findings was absenteeism, which considerably reduced the sample size by about fifty per cent. The reduced sample size was a result of my decision to limit data collection only to those students who were present in the control class and at least one of the treatment classes. Having more class sessions for both the control and treatment classes would have increased the reliability of the results. In view of this, it is unclear how well this innovation could be utilised in a class of fifty or more students vis-a-vis allotted teaching time. There is, however, no doubt the innovation worked well in a class of about thirty-two students.

Conclusion

This study explored whether engaging students in group work where they produced topic maps improves student participation when compared with traditionally used lecturing, and where participation is moreover hampered by the use of a second language. The study found that the innovation increased both class participation and quality of student learning.

Introducing group work was effective in overcoming barriers to classroom participation, especially fear of communicating in a second language. This is important as these days more and more universities are becoming international with an increasing number of foreign students. Though unintended, group work was also found to have a rippling effect of improving student attention span by making classes livelier and more fun. It also served as preparatory grounds for students to build their confidence before sharing their ideas with the entire class.

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