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LESSON STUDY: USING GROUPWORK ACTIVITY TO ENHANCE STUDENT'S OUTPUT IN EAP CLASSES

This article is a product of collaborative work between three university instructors that specifically focused on developing and enhancing students' output using groupwork in their English for Academic Purposes (EAP) classes. The experimental part of this paper was based on the method commonly known as lesson study and aimed at observing and analyzing the use of language input covered during the classes by students. To provide favorable environment for the language practice, greater time was allocated for the production part of the lesson, where students did a role play activity in groups. The experiment proved that groupwork indeed enhances student output and engages more of them. At the same time, it was revealed that providing more time for the production part does not always lead to an increase in student talking time. Low performing students' output as well, did not necessarily improve during such activities.

Keywords: communicative approach, lesson study, learner autonomy, groupwork

Introduction

The idea for this article originated from an informal discussion among the instructors working in English Language Programme at Social Sciences department of Astana IT university. The course titled English for Academic Purposes is embedded in the degree programmes in Information Technology, which is designed for first-year students from the fields of Software Engineering, Big Data Analysis, Cybersecurity and Digital Journalism. This is a mandatory course for the first trimester of an academic year. The course itself focuses on developing presentation and research skills of students in English language. It has become clear that most of the instructors delivering this course face difficulties in encouraging students' output during the lessons. This means that after presenting

the learning material the students rarely use it in the classroom activities or in their assignments. Therefore, we decided to plan a small-scale lesson study to test the specific strategies that we thought would be helpful to increase the students' language production in the lessons. The main research questions that we tried to answer in this article are

- How to increase the use of language learnt in the lesson, particularly at the production stage of the lesson?
- What activities and interaction patterns are more effective in increasing the students' output?
- What are the benefits of group activities in increasing the students' language production?

Research methods and materials

As a basis for this article the instructors chose lesson study method that is defined as «a system for building and sharing practitioner knowledge that involves teachers in learning from colleagues as they research, plan, teach, observe and discuss a classroom lesson» [1, p. 142]. In the first stage three instructors chose one specific topic from the syllabus and carefully designed the lesson plan. The chosen lesson shape was PPP (Presentation, Practice and Production). While designing the lesson the instructors decided to allocate less time for the presentation and more time for the production and practice stages. The instructors unanimously decided for the production part to use a role-play activity based on groupwork. In the second stage each instructor had to teach the same lesson to their learners. In teaching part at least one of other two instructors who contributed to lesson planning had to observe the colleague's lesson using the observation sheet with the criteria focused on the concepts related to the research questions. In the third stage the instructors analysed their observations and self-reflections. The final stage involved writing up the results of the research analysis.

The production part of the lesson in EFL classroom is usually distributed differently depending on the teaching style of the instructor. The most recent and commonly used approach to teaching English nowadays is the Communicative Language Teaching Approach which took its beginning in 1980. This method emphasises the importance of using the target language to connect people and employs group and pair work extensively as a means of creating a natural environment for practising the L2 by students. Therefore, it is believed that a substantial part of the EFL classes should be dedicated to students' output. In this concern, it is important to understand the previous research on Teacher Talking Time and Student Talking Time during the English language classes.

Teacher Talking Time (TTT) comprises the time teacher spends to instruct, give feedback or for organization purposes. According to Nunan (1991) the percentage of time the teacher talks during the class can vary in connection with the

aims of the lesson along with the programme curriculum [2]. TTT is the crucial part of English class as it is the time for the students to learn new materials. Nonetheless, modern trends in teaching language tend to advocate Learner-centered classroom claiming that STT should account for far greater time than TTT during the English lessons. In fact, encouraging students to speak is the essential part of instructors' work since practice in L2 is needed for students, not teachers [3]. Flege (2002) argues that eliciting students' responses enable them to use L2 and further results in independent communication in this language [4]. This is particularly needed for countries where English is not an official language and students have limited opportunity to practice it outside the classroom [5]. Nonetheless, as much as teachers understand the importance of STT being longer than the TTT, it is often challenging to adhere to this rule for most instructors.

Currently, educational theory and practice are looking for forms and methods that can create the conditions for the development of communication and teamwork skills that increase STT. Such forms and methods are based on the activity of each subject of the educational process, the ability to make decisions and choices independently, as well as the coexistence of different points of view and their free discussion. Groupwork, for instance, has a high potential for this achievement as a form of organizing the education process [6]. According to Fushino (2010), students can have plenty of opportunities to connect with each other in their second language in natural ways when working in small groups, which is likely to improve their communicative ability [7]. Long and Porter (1985) state that one of the main reasons why many second language students perform poorly in the classroom is simply that they do not have enough time to practice the new language, especially speaking; Therefore, groupwork increases the possibilities of practicing the language [8]. In well-organized small groupwork, a non-threatening classroom atmosphere could be created for optimal language learning, in which it appears easier for the students to have less psychological pressure when they think and speak without being observed by the whole class or the teacher [6].

In addition, many researchers highlighted the importance of using groupwork activities in the classroom to enhance learner autonomy [9; 10]. Considering the advantages of groupwork mentioned above it is possible to conclude that the students who think and work independently are more motivated, self-efficient and more confident about their own learning abilities [11]. Moreover, the learner autonomy is especially relevant at university level and within EFL context. The promotion of learner autonomy will make the learners more likely to be responsible for all or part of their language learning program [12]. Although many scholars agree about the positive effect of the groupwork in creating favourable learning environment and enhancing their autonomy, there have not been many studies that specifically aimed at evaluating students' language production during the lessons

in relation to the forms of activities generally used by the EFL teachers. This work particularly focuses on the lesson analysis where group role-play activity was used to measure students' output in EAP classes. Based on the literature review and the research questions we developed three hypotheses:

H1: Groupwork has a strong potential in encouraging students' language output in the lesson.

H2: Allocating more time for production part of the lesson increases students' language output.

H3: Learner autonomy has a positive impact on language production of students with low performance.

In the following part we provide a detailed discussion of the hypotheses and the lesson analysis based on the teachers' observations and self-reflections.

Results and discussion

H1: Groupwork has a strong potential in encouraging students' language output in the lesson.

As mentioned above in the research questions, one of the main objectives of this study was to analyze the benefits of group lessons in improving students' language skills. For this reason, the classes of three instructors were observed where a group work activity in the production part of the lesson was used. In addition, based on the literature review, a hypothesis: «Groupwork has a strong potential in encouraging students' language output in the lesson» was put forward. Based on observations of lessons and a comparison of reflective reports, we could claim that the hypothesis is confirmed. Groupwork in every observed class revealed a positive result in the practical use of the language and active involvement of the learners, clear role and function distribution. For instance, «In one group, it was noticeable that the leader distributed the task well among all members of the group and made it possible for everyone to express their opinions» (Self-reflection, teacher Nariman). It was also noticed by all observers that students with a good level of knowledge of the language take leadership positions in the group. This is also confirmed by Fushino (2010); in her study, she states that various group activities demand high communication skills and the capability to be engaged in interaction spontaneously [7].



Figure 1 – Students working on their ideas. Photo was taken by the instructor Aray upon the permission of her students for the sake of publication

Groupwork made it possible to involve everyone in the learning process; thus, each student felt responsible and had their role in groups. In addition, it should be noted that the students had the opportunity to teach each other. In one group, students were responsible for different tasks; for example, some students were preparing to defend the poster while others took part in designing it, and so everyone enjoyed the process of learning. According to Jiang (2009), the students can become more self-confident in a comfortable and relaxing learning atmosphere where they can play presenter, listener, or teachers' roles. In other groups, students decided to divide all speech presentations between all members of the group, even when they had low-performing students in the group [6]. With the support of the group members, these students were able to practice language even though they were shy and unconfident in the beginning.

The advantage of groupwork is that it allows for a greater quantity and broader variety of language practice that better adapts to individual needs and is conducted in a more positive effective climate [8]. Although there is a likelihood of an imbalance in the participation of students in groupwork, it can be confidently asserted that groupwork in the lessons of learning a second language provides an opportunity for practical use of the material studied and encourage group members to engage in the learning process.

H2: Allocating more time for production part of the lesson increases students' language output.

The second hypothesis of our research that allocating more time for production part of the lesson increases students' language output did not find its confirmation during both class observations and self-reflections of teachers. Students in average used only 50 % of the new vocabulary on hedging language during the production part of the lesson. One teacher reported that «Students were relying mainly on their previous knowledge of hedging language, for example often used modal verbs (can and may), whereas examples of high-level vocabulary representing (approximately, reasonably, on occasion, to some extent, estimate) were not used properly». This phenomenon can be explained by Krashen's acquisition-learning distinction which states that learning the language refers to '... knowing the rules, and being able to talk about them', while acquiring the knowledge occurs subconsciously and leads to having a 'feeling' for correct or wrong language without realizing the exact rules for it (Krashen, 1982, p. 10). He further concludes that students fall back on first language or previous knowledge «when a second language rule is needed in production but is not available» (p. 29). In other words, students learned the new vocabulary and they know it, however the acquisition process has not yet been completed for the full practice of it. Hence, it could be concluded that to acquire the new materials more than one lesson input is needed.

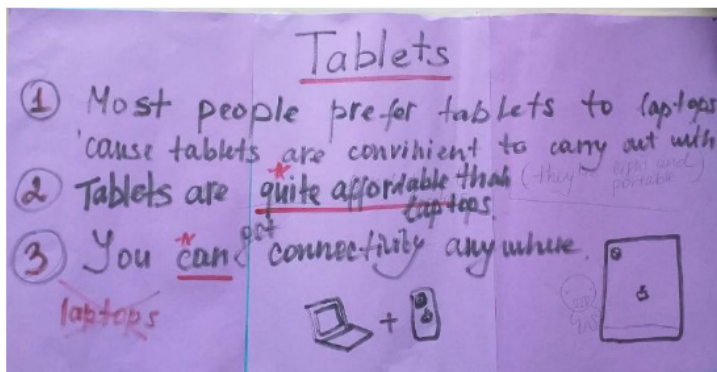


Figure 2 – The sentences presented by one of the groups. The teacher marked the examples of hedging language with stars

At the same time, even though the lesson plan allowed more time for the students' production, all three teachers had longer TTT than STT. For example,

teacher Nariman made students justify their responses in controlled practice, since some of the students were struggling to give reasons, he began to elaborate on students' answers and, in this way, he increased his TTT. On the other hand, teacher Ainur claimed that only a few students were willing to actively participate and take the initiative which led to a higher rate of teacher's involvement rather than that of students. Observing the given classes, we could see more of the traditional approach to class where the authority is the teacher who speaks the most and students are the ones who answer the questions [14; 15]. This could be a result of students being used to the traditional style of teaching and expecting more instruction from teachers rather than actively contributing to the lesson. Therefore, students' language output cannot be increased only by adding more time for it during one trimester. More time is needed for students to get accustomed to the new teaching approach.

H3: Learner autonomy has a positive impact on language production of students with low performance.

As Baranovskaya and Shaforostova (2018) stated «facilitating autonomous learning in the language classroom requires active participation from each student.» Using the role-play activity based on group interaction pattern we tried to achieve not only the learner autonomy, but also to encourage low-performing students to produce more language in the classroom. The role-play activity where students had to provide their arguments about different IT inventions using examples of hedging language indeed sparked the interest of learners in all groups. The reason for this might be the creative approach that has been encouraged throughout the activity. One of the teachers wrote in her self-reflection «Creative tasks in groups sparked more interest among low performing students, however their engagement level in the activity differed depending on their personalities.» The learners were deeply involved in drawing, decorating their posters, and trying to create some rhyming expressions. Taking into consideration this creative aspect of the activity we thought it would encourage the language production of low-performing students. However, according to our self-reflections and observations it has become clear that despite their highly engagement in the task, the low-performing students relied on L1 while doing the activity and a few of them even stayed silent throughout the activity. In this way, we can state that our third hypothesis about positive impact of learner autonomy on the language production of students with low performance was not confirmed.

Regardless of this fact we believe that passive learning took place and some language knowledge exchange happened during the activity. For example, listening to their peers' speech in English or writing down dictated sentences on the poster, the low-performing students internalised the language material that had been taught in the lesson, particularly in this case the use of hedging language in academic

texts. However, it might take more practice and time until they start to produce the language by themselves. Therefore, as teachers our next step is to focus on the development of learner autonomy both inside and outside the classroom. Although it seems a quite challenging process, but today most learners at the university level are lucky to have many different opportunities to become autonomous. Universities provide their students with free textbooks in English language, and they also have access to the limitless sources on the internet that enhances their learning, many of them are free. In addition, they can use different modern technologies that help them to organise their language learning process efficiently [11]. Despite these opportunities listed above it is the teachers' responsibility to provide gradual guidance and support in this process, so «that students can feel secure, even if their abilities are still lacking» [12, p. 17]. It has been suggested that developing learner autonomy in the language classroom is possible via stimulating pair and groupwork activities. Working with peers can ensure learner-centredness of the lessons [12]. As a result, the teachers will stop struggling with their talking timing, because as soon as group activities are encouraged and applied during the lessons, this automatically increases STT essentially.

Conclusion

As we discussed above, only one of our hypotheses was fully confirmed. Based on the teaching reflections it was possible to conclude that groupwork had a positive effect in increasing students' output in the EAP classes. It made possible to involve all the learners in the process regardless of their level of proficiency in English. The students were more independent and autonomous while allocating the roles to each other. We believe that the students' output has increased, because groupwork usually creates comfortable and relaxing learning environment. In this environment students are not afraid of making mistakes while speaking, because they work with their peers. They were less intimidated by the teachers' presence in the production part of the lesson because the teachers only monitored in the background, allowing the students to express their ideas freely. While this work confirmed the positive effect of groupwork in raising overall language output of the students, allocating more time for the production part of the lesson did not really reduce TTT. In every observed lesson TTT varied depending on the teachers' individual habits and style of lesson delivery. But overall, their TTT was higher than STT. This might be because the teachers are more used to the traditional style of teaching, where teachers are mostly upfront. The final hypothesis was also not confirmed. Although owing to role-play activity learners' autonomy in the classroom has been increased, it did not really affect low performing students' language output in the sessions. Finally, we highly recommend that this type of lesson studies should be carried out regularly for a longer period to improve our teaching practices. Only via teachers'

self-reflections, peer observations and experimenting with different teaching strategies, we can objectively measure students' progress in relation to their language output in EFL classrooms.

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САБАҚТЫ ЗЕРТТЕУ: АКАДЕМИЯЛЫҚ МАҚСАТҚА АРНАЛҒАН АҒЫЛШЫН ТІЛІ ПӘНІНДЕ ТОПТЫҚ ЖҰМЫС АРҚЫЛЫ СТУДЕНТТЕРДІҢ СӨЙЛЕУ ПРАКТИКАСЫН ЖАҚСARTU

Бұл мақала академиялық мақсатқа арналған ағылшын тілі пәнінде топтық жұмыс арқылы студенттердің сөйлеу практикасын дамытуға және жақсартуға бағытталған зерттеу жобасының нәтижесі болып табылады. Зерттеу үш университет оқытушысы тарапынан жүзеге асырылған. Мақаланың эксперименттік бөлігі сабақты зерттеу деп аталатын әдіске негізделген және студенттердің сабақ барысындағы тілдік қолданысын бақылауға және талдауға бағытталған. Тілдік қолданысқа қолайлы жағдай жасау үшін сабақтың практикалық бөлігіне көбірек уақыт бөлінді, осы кезеңде студенттер топтық тапсырма орындады. Тәжірибе топтық жұмыс шынымен де оқушылардың белсенділігін, олардың оқу процесіне деген қызығушылығын арттырғанын дәлелдеді. Алайда, сабақта практикаға көбірек уақыт бөлу әрдайым студенттердің сөйлеу уақытының ұлғаюына әкелмейтіні анықталды. Оған қоса, тілді меңгеру деңгейі төмен студенттердің нәтижесі топтық тапсырмаларды орындау кезінде еш өзгерген жоқ.

Кілтті сөздер: коммуникативті тәсіл, сабақты зерттеу, оқушының дербестігі, топтық жұмыс

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ИССЛЕДОВАНИЕ УРОКА: ИСПОЛЬЗОВАНИЕ ГРУППОВОЙ РАБОТЫ ДЛЯ УЛУЧШЕНИЯ РЕЗУЛЬТАТОВ УЧАЩИХСЯ НА ЗАНЯТИЯХ АНГЛИЙСКОГО ЯЗЫКА ДЛЯ АКАДЕМИЧЕСКИХ ЦЕЛЕЙ

Данная статья является результатом совместной работы трех университетских преподавателей, которые сосредоточились на развитии и улучшении результатов студентов с помощью групповой работы на уроках английского языка для академических целей. Экспериментальная часть этой статьи была основана на методе, широко известном как изучение уроков, и была направлена на наблюдение и анализ использования языкового ввода, используемого студентами во время занятий. Чтобы создать благоприятную среду для языковой практики, больше времени было отведено практической части урока, где студенты выполняли ролевую игру в группах. Эксперимент доказал, что групповая работа действительно повышает продуктивность студентов и вовлекает их больше в процесс обучения. В то же время выяснилось, что выделение большего количества времени для практической части не всегда приводит к увеличению времени, затрачиваемого студентами на говорение. Результат студентов с низким уровнем владения языком не изменился во время выполнения групповых заданий.

Ключевые слова: коммуникативный подход, изучение урока, самостоятельность учащихся, групповая работа

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