

Reading comprehension through group work activities in an EFL classroom: An action research report

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ISSN 1699-437X | Year 2014, Volume 10, Number 2 (September)

Abstract: This classroom action research study approaches the issue of reading skills based on the role of group work in the classroom. Group work is one of the major activities for generating ideas of any written piece of text. It facilitates EFL learners to read in social perspective, which makes their learning more diverse and informative. Classroom activities should reach learner's needs and understanding and this action research is performed to make a change of classroom activities since we observed a noticeable gap in student's text understanding. It is seen that group work works better in the classroom and is capable of making learners more conscious and understanding, which is of course an interesting and free environment. It also facilitates learners to be more interactive and socialized in the classroom.

Keywords: Group work -Social Interaction - Comprehension - Reading skill - Learning - EFL

Resumen: Este proyecto de investigación-acción aborda la cuestión del rol del trabajo en grupo en las habilidades lectoras. El trabajo en grupo es una de las actividades más importantes para generar ideas en torno a un texto escrito. Facilita que los aprendices de inglés lengua extranjera (EFL) lean desde una perspectiva social, lo que hace el aprendizaje más diverso e informativo. Las actividades del aula deben responder a las necesidades y comprensión del alumnado y este proyecto de investigación-acción se realizó para cambiar las actividades del aula ya que observamos lagunas en la comprensión de textos del alumnado. Se observa que el trabajo en grupo funciona mejor en el aula y es capaz de hacer a los aprendices más conscientes y con mayor capacidad de comprensión, además de proporcionar un entorno más libre e interesante. También facilita que los aprendices sean más interactivos y sociales en el aula.

Palabras clave: Trabajo en grupo – Interacción social – Comprensión - Habilidades lectoras - Aprendizaje - Inglés como lengua extranjera.

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To cite the article:

Rahaman, A. (2014). Reading comprehension through group work activities in an EFL classroom: An action research report. *Working Papers on Culture, Education and Human Development*, 10 (2), 1-8.
http://www.uam.es/otros/ptcedh/2014v10_pdf/v10n2eng.pdf

INTRODUCTION

Reading skill is one of the major skills of language. In the Bangladeshi context reading skill is understood as one of the basic skills in academic purposes, which is used to carry out classroom engagement and academic goals. But it has been generally agreed that the students of EFL (English as a foreign language) in Bangladesh fail to understand and internalize the issues when reading texts. This action research study is a quest for solving the problem and assessing the feasibility of group work in classrooms. Comprehension is defined as "intentional thinking during which meaning is constructed through interactions between text and reader" (Harris and Hodges, 1995, cited in National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000).

Action research is a process through which teachers investigate teaching and learning so as to improve their own and their students' learning. This action research is done for identifying effective classroom activity and as a way to identify a technique that promotes better reading comprehension. This activity is applied to make groups among students and ensure a fellow feeling attitude. The activity should make the learners understanding by sharing and socializing. Group work is observed as an essential issue that provides input that is comprehensible. Reading means "reading and understanding" (Ur, 1996). A foreign language learner who says "I can read words but I don't know what they mean" is not, therefore, reading, in this sense. It is merely decoding the written symbols. Here comprehensible input stands for that input which they can understand. Text comprehension involves the construction of an integrated and coherent representation of a text's meaning (Gernsbacher, 1997). Therefore, we might predict a relation between a reader's ability to comprehend text and their ability to produce a structurally coherent narrative.

Group reading instruction includes rich tasks which promote deep understanding; allows teachers to teach reading before and during the reading process, (not only after the reading process); and allows instructors to adjust teaching to meet the needs of all learners. In groups everyone is engaged and everyone has a voice. Students can sometimes learn more from each other than they can from the teacher. Also, this mode of instruction involves the social context of learning. The classroom is clearly a place where people have to work together, essentially requiring a compromise between their own individuality and the dynamics of the whole group (McDonough and Shaw, 2003). It is ideally a co-operative environment. The teacher generally demonstrates such strategies for students until the students are able to carry them out independently

Vygotsky's Social Development theory (1962) promotes learning contexts in which students play an active role in learning. According to Vygotsky (1962), humans use tools that develop from a culture, such as speech and writing, to mediate their social environments (Vygotsky, 1962 cited in Learning-Theories.com, 2014). "Pair and group work immediately increase the amount of student talking time" (Harmer, 2007, p. 165). The tasks in the classroom should be focused on Student Talking Time (STT), which comprises discussion and interaction among students and interaction with the teacher.

According to the study of Jing Meng (2010) group work and pair work have become increasingly popular in language teaching since they are seen to have many advantages. Group work is a cooperative activity: four students, perhaps with a topic, are doing a role-play or solving a problem. In groups, students tend to participate more equally, and they are also more able to experiment and use the language than they are in a whole-class arrangement. Pair work has many of the same advantages. The moment students get into pairs and start working on a problem or talking about something, many more of them will be doing the activity than if the teacher was working with the whole class, where only one student talks at a time. Both pair work and group work give the students chances for greater independence. Because they are working together without the teacher controlling every move, they make some of their own learning decisions, they decide what language to use to complete a certain task, and they can work without the pressure of the whole class listening to what they are doing. Interaction in small groups, as discussed in the paper, provides a basis for language acquisition (Slavin, 1983).

With learners working in groups or pairs they learn how to read and speak effectively, how to work out what texts mean how to gather important information.

According to Olsen and Kagan (1992), cooperative learning is defined as "group learning activities organized so that learning is dependent on the socially structured exchange of information between learners in groups and in which each learner is held accountable for his or her own learning and is motivated to increase the learning of others" (p. 37). The spirit within the team has to be one of positive interdependence, that is, a feeling that success for any one is tied directly to the success of others. To put it more concretely, a cooperative learning approach defines the class as heterogeneous groups; the class is organized in groups of four or six students in order to fulfill a learning task cooperatively. The learning task is based on interaction and reciprocal interdependence among the members of group and requires mutual help. In this educational approach, students and teachers are in a state of dynamic cooperation and together build up an intimate learning and social atmosphere in the classroom.

Findings from 25 different studies (Slavin, 1983) show that cooperative learning techniques are more effective than traditional ones for student achievement. The studies show that the aspects of structure, individual accountability and group rewards increase lower level learning outcomes, and that higher level learning outcomes are also improved by the components of autonomy and group decision-making. In collaborative learning situations, ESL (English as a second language) learners are given more opportunity to use their first and second language for exploration of ideas, attitudes, for hypothesizing and predicting and asking questions in a supportive environment. They provide opportunities for ESL learners to develop proficiency in Standard Australian English (SAE) in an active and meaningful way through working with different groups of peers such as pairings, buddies, small groups, conferencing etc. ESL learners can see different socio-cultural language and behaviors modeled in a variety of meaningful contexts.

In short, it is seen that group work is a feature of collaborative learning, which provides social interaction and peer learning opportunity. But, the literatures are not related to Bangladeshi context. Though reading development is based on reading in context so, the learners should get the input from their context.

METHOD

The action research study was an experimental intervention. It aimed to analyze the use of classroom group work activity in a relation with reading comprehension with the possibility of applying group work in classroom and to use the results of that analysis to make a way out about the status of the interaction hypothesis. A qualitative-quantitative approach to the research design, which is very transparent and easily understandable, was adopted for this study. A pre-test and a post-test have been conducted for gathering the result of the strategic changes.

The pre-test is for identifying the existing cognition of the students in language uses and the post-test has been conducted for getting the implication of applying the group work in a real classroom. The question papers have been prepared based on same difficulty level, which has been reviewed by two teachers of the respective school.

The participants involved in this study were the EFL 8th grade students of a secondary school in Dhaka. The course that was taken for this research was the compulsory English as first paper. There were 18 students in the experimental group. The age level of the participants was 12-13 years. Two students were absent in the post-test. Two different question papers were prepared for the study. The first one was for the pre-test, which was used for knowing their present ability of reading skill. Though they were taught in traditional manner, which is based on drills and error correction and of course there was no activity like group work.

The second test was planned after the students getting group work tasks, which were treated as post-test. We tried to maintain the test batteries in the same quality to measure the impact of group work. The question paper of the pre-test appears as Appendix A and the question paper of the post-test appears in Appendix B.

The researcher considered 4 classes of the course. Two classes were for observing the classroom activities performed, which were based on drills and instruction of rules separately. Each class was for 45 minutes as the school's schedule. To investigate the reading competence of that stage the pre-test was designed according to the National textbook of class 8 and the authority of the school did not allow any questions apart from the textbook. The reading comprehension task required first to read individually and then prepared a question to answer of three items for the students. The first item was to make summary of that comprehension which was made for investigating the processing of generating ideas and concepts. The second test battery was five short questions to answer. Each answer was instructed to be in one single sentence to make sure that the students could make the central concept in a single sentence or not. The third item was a table of two columns. One was titled A and another was B. In both columns there were fragmented parts of five sentences. The parts were randomly placed and expected to match the table to make five complete sentences. After this procedure the researcher conducted 2 classes on reading comprehension, based on same category of the post-test items. In the beginning of the class the researcher took 15 minutes to provide schema of the text and gave some information on group work activities. After that, the students were grouped in groups of four members. Two groups were organized in five members because two students were left after making four groups in the class. Then the students were given 15 minutes to read the text and 10 minutes were given to discuss.

In the fourth class, the researcher prepared a question paper for the post-test which was designed with same pattern as the pre-test. Thirty minutes was given to answer the questions. Two students were absent on that day so, the data was prepared on 14 students.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The results of pre and post-tests are analyzed separately. The analyses were done in the segment on each student's marks out of 15.

Pre-test

The pre-test showed an average view of the reading skills of the students. Most of the students were habituated in traditional drills, which were taken from their textbook. But in this task the test batteries were not from the textbook. The overall results collected from pre-test are given below. The analysis is shown as percentages though there were in little number of participants.

18.75% students got more than 80% marks
50.00 % students got more than 60% marks
31.25 % students got more than 40% marks

In terms of qualitative analysis it has been noticed that the percentage of score is mostly dominated by the 60% marks which shows an average standard of mark scheme. The teacher and the researched were not satisfied with the marks gained by the students, as student scores are very important in the Bangladeshi educational system and policy.

Post-test

The post-test was in same framework as previous test. The result was prepared based on different questions, which had been tried to maintain same quality as the pre-test. After conducting group work activities the students

were very excited to perform. It was very interesting for them even though they had received it for the first time. The assessment of their result showed change in their reading skills. The overall results collected for the post-test are given below:

42.85% students got more than 80% marks
42.85% students got more than 60% marks
14.28 % students got more than 40% marks

The post-test showed remarkable improvement among the students and they can answer the reading task better than before when they didn't get group tasks and discussion. After applying group work activity in the classroom we observed that the students were very keen to participate in the activities and around 70% students were trying to be a part of the task spontaneously. According to the numeric data generated after the post-test it is notable that students were able of looking towards 80% marks positively.

This action research study shows that comprehension reading skill is based on the understanding and generating ideas. The text should be internalized and comprehensible. Group work has a good impact to develop this ability. The data showed in this research advocates that noticeable better results could be achieved through group work than traditional drills. The learners feel more comfort and enthusiastic by doing such activities. It is also found that group work can be applied in an EFL context.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Although this study was conducted in a context which was full of pedagogical obstacles but it itself could be treated as an attempt to establish a way to learning. The data and the study itself were brief in nature but after conducting the study it seems that teaching text reading comprehension through group work will be effective in secondary classrooms. The teachers should be trained in doing such activities, so teacher training is necessary to implement group work. Most students can work well in groups if teachers set the platform at the beginning of the term, informally check in with groups to see how things are going, offer assistance as needed, and provide time for groups to assess their own effectiveness. The success of this study lays on the teacher's knowledge of group work activities and view to comprehensive text reading skill. According to this study, it is possible to say that text reading can be better understood by sharing, exchanging and socializing through group work. It makes the classroom student-centered and the teacher can get the experience of finest activity in the classroom. The learners become freer and they can explore and notice their own improvement within a friendly and fellow feeling environment.

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APPENDIX A: THE PRE-TEST QUESTIONS

Read the passage very carefully and answer question number: 1-3 (Marks: 15)

When Anwar arrived at his new school, he met a lot of people. He had a very busy day. "When I go home," he said to himself, "I'm going to write some names down in my notebook because I want to remember them."

When Anwar arrived home, he sat down in his room and wrote in his notebook. He wrote down ten names and some notes about the people. This is what he wrote :

Some of the people I met on my first day at school.

- Mr Anis Ahmed** – a nice man, teaches us general science.
- Shahid** – the smallest boy in class, wears a pen in his pocket.
- Kishan** – the cleverest boy in class, wears glasses.
- Bahadur** – our friendly old bearer at school, has a nice smile.
- Kashem** – has curly hair and a mole on his cheek.
- Mrs Ayesha Amin** – our English teacher, can tell interesting stories.
- Luna** – the smallest girl in class, wears glasses.
- Rina** – Luna's best friend wears two long plaits.
- Mina** – the tallest girl in Class 8, is very clever.
- Sarah** – sits next to Mina, has one short plait.

Now match the people in Anwar's notebook with the pictures.

Question 1: Write a summary of the written text given above. (5 marks)

Question 2: Answer the following questions in your own words: (5 marks)

- a. Why does Anwar use notebook?
- b. What did he write down?
- c. Who is Mr. Ahmed?
- d. Who does wear glasses?
- e. Who is the English teacher of class 8?
- f. What should be the title of the given text? Justify.

Question 3: Match the table (column A and B) and make 5 sentences. (5 marks)

| A | B |
|----------------------|---------------------------------|
| Anwar wrote down | has a nice smile |
| Mr. Ahmed | met a lot of people |
| The old bearer | some names in his notebook. |
| At the school, Anwar | and some notes in his notebook. |
| He wrote ten names | is a nice man. |

APPENDIX B: THE POST-TEST QUESTIONS

Read the passage very carefully and answer question number: 1-3: (Marks: 15)

The next day Class 8 had a discussion with their general science teacher, MrAnis Ahmed. "We've been talking with our new student, Anwar, sir", said Kashem. "In his old school, they used the profit from their school shop to make a school garden. We also make a profit from our school shop and we have enough land to make a school garden." Mr. Ahmed looked out of the classroom window.

"Do you want to use that piece of land over there?" asked Mr. Ahmed. "Yes, sir," answered Rina. "Do you think it's possible? We want to use it to grow flowers." And vegetables," added Anwar. "Well, I don't know," said Mr. Ahmed. "What do you know about gardening?" "Some of us do gardening at home, and Anwar worked in the garden at his old school," replied Kashem. "But couldn't you help us, sir?" "Of course," said Mr.Ahmed. "It's a good idea, but first I must discuss it with the headmaster. Only he can decide. How many of you are interested in gardening?" About twenty students put up their hands.

Question 1: Write a summary of the text given above. (5 marks)

Question 2: Answer the questions: (in one sentence each) (5 marks)

- a. Where did Anwar make profit?
- b. Where was the land for gardening?
- c. What was the good idea?
- d. Who can only decide?
- e. How many students were interested in gardening?
- f. What should be the title of the given text? Justify.

Question 3: Match the table (column A and B) and make 5 sentences (5 marks)

| A | B |
|----------------------------|------------------------------|
| Anwar worked in the garden | it with headmaster |
| Mr. Ahmed looked | do gardening at home |
| Mr. Ahmed went to discuss | at his old school |
| Some of the students | were interested in gardening |
| About twenty students | out of the classroom window |