

COLLABORATIVE LEARNING AND GROUP WORK IN DEVELOPING SPEAKING SKILLS: PRINCIPLES AND CLASSROOM STRATEGIES

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Abstract. Collaborative learning and group work are central principles of communicative language teaching, yet many teachers find them difficult to implement effectively. This article reviews the theoretical rationale for collaborative learning, describes the main types of group-based speaking activities, analyses the common difficulties that arise — unequal participation, use of the first language, time management and assessment — and proposes research-based solutions. Drawing on established work on cooperative learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1999; Slavin, 1995), peer interaction (Long & Porter, 1985; Storch, 2002) and sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978; Mercer, 2000), it sets out practical principles for effective implementation. The article is methodological and review-oriented; it does not report new empirical data.

Keywords: collaborative learning, group work, speaking skills, peer interaction, English language teaching.

Annotatsiya. Hamkorlikda o'rganish va guruhda ishlash kommunikativ til o'qitishning markaziy tamoyillari hisoblanadi, biroq ko'plab o'qituvchilar ularni samarali qo'llashda qiyinchiliklarga duch keladi. Maqolada hamkorlikda o'rganishning nazariy asoslari ko'rib chiqiladi, guruhda gapirishni rivojlantiruvchi asosiy topshiriq turlari tavsiflanadi, keng tarqalgan qiyinchiliklar (notekis ishtirok, ona tilidan foydalanish, vaqtni boshqarish, baholash) tahlil qilinadi va tadqiqotlarga asoslangan yechimlar taklif etiladi. Maqola metodik va obzor xarakteriga ega bo'lib, yangi empirik ma'lumotlarni keltirmaydi.

Kalit so'zlar: hamkorlikda o'rganish, guruhda ishlash, gapirish ko'nikmalari, tengdoshlar o'zaro ta'siri, ingliz tili o'qitish.

Аннотация. Совместное обучение и работа в группах являются центральными принципами коммуникативного преподавания языка, однако многие учителя сталкиваются с трудностями при их применении. В статье рассматриваются теоретические основания совместного обучения, описываются основные типы заданий для развития устной речи в группах, анализируются типичные трудности (неравное участие, использование родного языка, управление временем, оценивание) и предлагаются основанные на исследованиях решения. Статья носит методический и обзорный характер и не содержит новых эмпирических данных.

Ключевые слова: совместное обучение, работа в группах, навыки говорения, взаимодействие сверстников, преподавание английского языка.

1. Introduction

“Work in groups to discuss this” is among the most frequent instructions in the communicative language classroom, yet teachers often report that group work does not deliver the benefits they expect: a few confident learners dominate while others stay silent, learners slip into their first language, and the activity can appear noisy and unfocused. These difficulties have led some practitioners to doubt whether group work genuinely promotes learning or merely produces the appearance of activity. The research literature, however, consistently shows that well-

structured collaborative learning produces stronger outcomes than competitive or purely individual arrangements (Johnson & Johnson, 1999; Slavin, 1995). The gap between this evidence and teachers' frustrations suggests that the problem lies not with group work in principle but with how it is designed and managed.

This article therefore has a practical purpose: to clarify why collaborative learning supports the development of speaking skills and to set out how it can be implemented effectively. It first reviews the theoretical rationale, then describes the main types of group-based speaking activity, then examines common challenges together with research-based solutions, and finally distils a set of principles for effective implementation. The article is a methodological review grounded in established literature; it does not report new empirical data.

2. Theoretical rationale for collaborative learning

The case for collaborative learning rests on several mutually reinforcing arguments. The most immediate is the question of practice opportunity. In a class of thirty learners with a single teacher, whole-class interaction allows each learner only a small share of speaking time. Group and pair work multiply these opportunities many times over. Long and Porter (1985) showed not only that group work increases the quantity of learner talk but also that it improves its quality, since in peer interaction learners initiate exchanges, ask questions and attempt a wider range of language functions than they do when responding to the teacher.

A second argument is sociocultural. Vygotsky (1978) located the origins of learning in social interaction, and Mercer (2000) extended this insight by analysing how learners use talk to think together, building knowledge through what he called exploratory talk in which ideas are shared, questioned and jointly developed. From this standpoint, group work is valuable precisely because it allows learners to support one another within their zones of proximal development. Storch (2002), examining patterns of interaction in pair work, found that collaborative pairs — those in which learners engage equally and pool their resources — produced the most productive language learning, whereas dominant or passive patterns were less beneficial. This finding is important: the value of group work depends on the nature of the interaction it generates, which in turn depends on how the teacher structures it.

A third argument concerns acquisition mechanisms. As noted in the wider literature on interaction (Long, 1996) and output (Swain, 1985), learners acquire language by negotiating meaning and by being pushed to produce it. Collaborative tasks that contain genuine information gaps and require a shared outcome create the conditions for both processes. Finally, collaborative learning has affective benefits: working with peers in a small group is generally less threatening than performing for the whole class, which can reduce the language anxiety described by Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) and increase learners' willingness to take part.

3. Types of collaborative speaking activity

A range of activity types can be used to develop speaking through collaboration, each serving somewhat different purposes. Information-gap activities, in which each learner holds part of the information needed to complete a task, create a genuine reason to communicate and are particularly useful for practising questions and the exchange of factual information (Ur, 1996). Because the information is genuinely split, learners cannot complete the task without speaking and listening to one another.

Jigsaw activities extend this principle: each member of a group becomes responsible for one part of a topic, masters it, and then teaches it to the others, so that the group can complete a task only by combining everyone's contribution. This structure builds what Johnson and Johnson (1999) call

positive interdependence, ensuring that every learner has a necessary role. Discussion and ranking tasks, in which groups exchange opinions and must reach agreement, generate extended argumentation and practise the language of agreeing, disagreeing and justifying; Harmer (2007) notes that such activities work best when the topic is genuinely engaging and when learners are given time and support to prepare their contributions.

Role-plays and simulations allow learners to rehearse language for real situations within the safety of an imagined scenario, which can reduce anxiety and encourage experimentation (Thornbury, 2005). Finally, project work — in which groups research a topic over an extended period and present a product such as a presentation, survey report or short video — integrates speaking with the other skills and gives learners an authentic purpose and audience (Willis, 1996). Across all these activity types, the common feature is that successful completion depends on genuine communication rather than on the mechanical production of predetermined forms.

4. Common challenges and research-based solutions

The first and most frequently reported challenge is unequal participation, where confident learners dominate and others remain silent. Storch's (2002) analysis suggests that this reflects the pattern of interaction rather than an inevitable feature of group work, and that it can be addressed by structuring roles and accountability. Assigning rotating roles — for example facilitator, note-taker, time-keeper and reporter — gives every learner a defined function, while structured participation routines such as having each member contribute in turn help to distribute talk more evenly.

A second challenge is the use of the first language. Some recourse to the first language is natural and can even be useful for organising complex tasks, but excessive use deprives learners of speaking practice. Practical responses include ensuring that tasks are clearly understood before they begin, since confusion often triggers a switch to the first language; providing the vocabulary and useful phrases that learners need to carry out the task in English; and monitoring groups and gently redirecting them rather than relying on prohibition alone. A third challenge is time management: collaborative activities usually take longer than teachers anticipate, and groups finish at different rates. Setting clear time limits, giving warnings as the deadline approaches, and preparing extension tasks for groups that finish early all help to keep the class working productively.

A fourth challenge is assessment. Because it is difficult to judge individual contributions to a collective product, fair assessment of group work requires a combination of methods: observation during the activity, an element of individual accountability such as a short individual task or follow-up question, clear rubrics that reward both communicative performance and collaborative behaviour, and an element of self- and peer-assessment. Dörnyei (2001) further notes that the way teachers frame and respond to group work strongly affects learners' motivation, so feedback that recognises effort and improvement, not only accuracy, is an important part of effective practice.

5. Principles for effective implementation

Synthesising the theory and the practical considerations above, several principles emerge for the effective use of collaborative learning in speaking instruction. First, tasks should have a genuine communicative purpose, so that learners must speak in order to achieve an outcome rather than simply to display language. Second, tasks should be structured but not over-controlled: clear goals, defined roles and time limits provide support, while leaving room for learners to make their own choices about what to say. Third, groups should generally be heterogeneous, mixing learners of

different proficiency so that stronger learners can support weaker ones, in keeping with the sociocultural rationale (Vygotsky, 1978; Mercer, 2000).

Fourth, collaborative skills should be taught explicitly rather than assumed: learners benefit from being shown how to listen actively, take turns, invite quieter members to contribute, disagree respectfully and build on one another's ideas. Fifth, tasks should be designed to create positive interdependence and individual accountability together, so that the group genuinely needs every member and no one can withdraw unnoticed (Johnson & Johnson, 1999; Slavin, 1995). Sixth, the teacher's role during group work is to monitor, support and give feedback rather than to control, intervening to assist groups that are struggling and noting language points for later attention. Applied together, these principles help to ensure that group work produces the rich, balanced interaction that research associates with successful language learning.

6. Conclusion

Collaborative learning and group work, when thoughtfully designed and managed, offer powerful means of developing speaking skills. They increase the quantity and quality of learner talk (Long & Porter, 1985), create the conditions for negotiation of meaning and pushed output (Long, 1996; Swain, 1985), draw on the social nature of learning (Vygotsky, 1978; Mercer, 2000), and provide a supportive setting that can reduce anxiety and raise willingness to communicate. The difficulties that teachers commonly encounter — unequal participation, first-language use, time pressure and assessment — are real, but the literature indicates that they are largely consequences of how group work is structured and can therefore be addressed through careful task design, explicit teaching of collaborative skills, and an appropriate teacher role.

For teachers in Uzbekistan and comparable contexts, the practical implication is that collaborative learning need not be adopted wholesale or perfectly from the outset. A gradual approach — beginning with short, well-structured pair activities and expanding toward more ambitious group tasks and projects as both teacher and learners gain confidence — is consistent with the evidence and manageable within the constraints of ordinary classrooms. The argument here is conceptual and methodological; testing these principles systematically in local classrooms would be a valuable direction for future empirical research. What the existing literature establishes is that speaking is learned through speaking, and that well-organised collaboration is among the most effective ways to give every learner the chance to do so.

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