Group Work and Language Learning

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Like all learning activities, group work is more likely to go well if it is properly planned. Planning requires an understanding of the principle that lies behind successful group work.

The principle of group work

Several factors work together to result in group work where *everyone* involved is interested, active, and thoughtful. If these factors agree with each other, then group work is likely to be successful. If they are not in agreement, group work is likely to be unsuccessful. The five factors are (1) the learning goals of group work, (2) the task, (3) the way information is distributed, (4) the seating arrangement of the members of the group, and (5) the social relationships between the members of the group.

Let us look first at the learning goals of group work before seeing how the factors work together.

The goals of group work

The following description of the goals of group work focuses on the spoken use of language. There are several reasons for this focus. Firstly, group work is most commonly used to get learners talking to each other. Secondly, much research on group work in language learning has studied spoken activity, partly because this is the most easily observed and recorded. Thirdly, most teachers use speaking activities in unprincipled ways. One of the aims of this article is to suggest how such activities can be used and adapted to achieve goals in language-learning classes.

Group work can help learning in the following ways.

1. Negotiation of input: Group work provides an opportunity for learners to get exposure to language that they can understand (negotiate comprehensible input) and which contains unknown items for them to learn. There has been considerable research on the possible sources of this input and the processes of negotiation (Long and Porter 1985), with the general recommendation that group work properly handled is one of the most valuable sources.

2. New language items: Group work gives learners exposure to a range of language items and language functions. This will often require preteaching of the needed language items. Group work provides more opportunities for use of the new items compared to the opportunities in teacher-led classes. Group work may also improve the quality of these opportunities in terms of individualization, motivation, depth of processing, and affective climate.

3. Fluency: Group work allows learners to develop fluency in the use of language features that they have already learned (Davies 1982). The arguments supporting group work for learning new items also apply to developing proficiency in the use of these items.

4. Communication strategies: Group work gives learners the opportunity to learn communication strategies. These strategies include negotiation strategies to control input (seeking clarification, seeking confirmation, checking comprehension, repetition), strategies to keep a conversation going (Holmes and Brown 1976; Nation 1980), strategies to make up for† a lack of language items or a lack of fluency in the use of such items (Tarone 1980), and strategies for managing long turns in speaking (Brown et al. 1984).

5. Content: Particularly where English is taught through the curriculum, a goal of group work may be the mastery of the content of the curriculum subject the learners are studying. For example, a communicative task based on the water cycle may have as one of its goals the learning of the processes involved in the water cycle and the development of an awareness of how the water cycle affects our lives. In addition, the teacher may expect the learners to achieve one or more of the language-learning goals listed above.

Types of group work

A useful way of classifying group-work activities is to look at the distribution of the information needed to do the activity. In many group-work activities learners have equal access to the same material or information and cooperate to do the task. In the following discussion this is called the *cooperating arrangement*. In the *superior-inferior arrangement* one member of the group has information that all the others need. In the *combining arrangement* each learner has a different piece of information that

all the others need. In the *individual arrangement* each learner has access to the same information but must perform or deal with a different part of it. These four different types of group work achieve different learning goals, are best suited to different kinds of tasks, require different kinds of seating arrangement, and draw on or encourage different kinds of social relationships. In order for group work to be successful, each type of group work must have its most suitable choice of other factors. Let us now look at each type in turn to see how the principle of group work applies.

The combining arrangement

The combining arrangement is the ideal arrangement for group work because it ensures interest and participation. It may be noticed that ways of making other group-work arrangements more effective often involve adding an element of combining. The essential feature of a combining arrangement is that each learner has unique, essential information. This means that each learner in a group has a piece of information that the others do not have, and each piece of information is needed to complete the task. Here is an example involving a group of three learners:

Each learner has a map of an island. However, on one learner's map only some of the towns are named and only some of the roads are indicated. On the second learner's map some of the other towns are named, the railway system is given, and the airport is shown. On the third learner's map the remaining roads and towns are shown, the central mountain is named, and the forest is indicated. Each learner's map is therefore incomplete, and each learner has information that the other two do not have. By combining this information each learner can make a complete map. They do this by keeping their map hidden from the others and by describing what is on their map for the others to draw on theirs.

The best seating arrangement of the members of the group during this activity supports the essential features of the arrangement. Each learner needs to have equal access to the others to get the essential information while preserving the uniqueness of their own information. This means that when working in pairs the learners should face each other, because that allows good communication while hiding their written or pictorial† information. When working in a group, it is best if the

	Combining	Cooperating	Superior–Inferior	Individual
Distribution of information	Each learner has unique essential information	All learners have equal access to the same information and to each other's view of it	One or more learners have information that the others do not have	All learners have the same information but use a different part
Seating arrangement	Learners sit at an equal distance from each other, facing each other	Learners sit beside each other facing the information	The knowers face the seekers	The learners face each other
Social relationship	Equality, mutual dependency	Equality	Inequality, the knowers are in a superior position	Equality, but with focus on individual performance
Most suitable learning goals	Negotiation of input Mastering content Fluency	New language items Fluency	New language items Mastering content	Fluency New language items
Most suitable tasks	Completion Ordering Providing directions Matching, classifying, distinguishing	Ranking, ordering, choosing Finding implications, causes, uses Solving problems Producing material	Data gathering Completion Providing directions	Solving problems Completion
A typical example	A strip story	A ranking exercise	An interview	A chain story or roleplay

Table 1: The factors involved in group work

learners sit in a circle, so that each learner is an equal distance from any other learner. Equal access† to each other is the most important element in the seating arrangement of combining-arrangement groups.

The social relationship amongst the members of a combining group needs to be one of equality. For this reason it is usually unwise for the teacher to become a member of a group unless the learners are prepared to treat the teacher as an equal and the teacher is willing to take a non-dominant role. Some teachers find this difficult to do. In addition, various status relationships among learners may upset the activity. Research by Philips (1972) with the Warm Springs Indians found that the way in which the local community's group activities were organized had a strong effect on learners' participation in classroom activities. Just as social relationships can affect the group activity, participation in the group activity can have effects on the social relationships of learners. Aronson et al. (1975) and Lucker et al. (1976) found that working in combining arrangements increased the liking that members of the group had for each other, and resulted in a relationship of equality.

Research on the combining arrangement as a means of achieving learning goals has focused on acquiring language through negotiating comprehensible input (Long and Porter 1985:222; Doughty and Pica 1986) and mastering content (Lucker et al. 1976). Long and Porter call combining-arrangement activities "two-way tasks" to distinguish them from superior-inferior activities ("one-way tasks"). This research indicates a superiority for combining-arrangement activities over teacher-fronted activities and "one-way tasks." Long and Porter's excellent article goes into this in detail.

The most suitable tasks for combining-arrangement group work include:

1. completion, e.g., completing a picture by exchanging information, completing a story by pooling† ideas;

2. providing directions, e.g., describing a picture for someone to draw, telling someone how to make something;

3. matching, classifying, distinguishing, e.g., deciding if your part-ner's drawing is the same as yours, arranging pictures in the same order as your partner's unseen pictures (Nation 1977);

4. ordering, e.g., putting the sentences or pictures of a story in order (Gibson 1975).

Combining-arrangement activities do not usually present problems for the teacher. Group size is not a restricting factor. Strip-story exercises (Gibson 1975) involving the ordering of pictures or sentences can be done with groups of 15 or more as long as learners can sit in a large circle or move about to have easy access to each other. One difficulty that may occur is maintaining the uniqueness of each learner's information. This can be done by getting learners to memorize their information at the beginning of the task, or, in pair work, setting up a physical barrier between learners. This physical barrier may be a cardboard screen about 30 centimeters high.

Should combining groups be made up of learners with mixed proficiency or with roughly similar proficiency? In assessing *the spread of participation* in the activity, Nation (1985) found that learners in a homogeneous,† low-proficiency group had more equal spoken participation than learners in mixed groups. Varonis and Gass (1983, reported in Long and Porter 1985) found that most *negotiation of meaning* occurred when learners were of different language backgrounds and of different proficiency levels. Clearly, different goals will require different group membership.

The cooperating arrangement

The cooperating arrangement is the most common kind of group work. Its essential feature is that all learners have equal access to the same information and have equal access to each other's view of it. This is because the purpose of a cooperating activity is for learners to share their understanding of the solutions to the task or of the material involved. Here is an example:

The learners are shown a picture and have several questions to answer about it, such as:

If you had to write a one-word title for this picture, what would it be?
What happened before the event in this picture?

What are the characters' feelings towards each other?

The learners discuss their answers to the questions. Maley, Duff, and Grellet's (1980) book *The Mind's Eye* consists of many activities like this.

The best seating arrangement for the members of the group is to sit in a horseshoe† with the material in the open end of the horseshoe, or in a circle if there is no material to look at. Similarly, in a pair the learners should sit facing the same direction (⇌) with the material in front of them. As much as possible, all the learners in a group should be the same distance from the material and the same distance from each other. If the information is a text or a picture, then it is best not to give each learner a copy, because this would encourage individual rather than cooperative activity.

Group work is most commonly used to get learners talking to each other.

Cooperating requires some degree of equality between learners, particularly a rough equality of skill. Research shows that group performance is often inferior to the best individual's performance if there is an exceptional† individual in the group (Hill 1982). Thus, for cooperating activities it is best to put exceptional learners in one group rather than to spread them across groups. The considerable amount of research on cooperating activities with native speakers (Hill 1982; Johnson et al. 1981; Sharan 1980; Slavin 1980) shows the good effects that such work has on improving social relationships among learners, including learners from different ethnic backgrounds.

The most suitable tasks for cooperating-arrangement group work include:

1. ranking, ordering, choosing, e.g., choosing the best candidate for a job, ranking a list of items needed for survival or a list of actions open to you;

2. finding implications, causes, or uses, e.g., brainstorming† the uses of a paper clip† on a desert island, interpreting a picture;

3. solving problems, e.g., answering *Dear Abby* letters, solving logical puzzles, simulations;

4. producing material, e.g., making a radio program, preparing for a debate or play.

The major problem with cooperating arrangements is encouraging each learner to play an active part in the group. Because all learners have equal access to the same information, no individual is essential to the activity as occurs in the combining arrangement. Various strategems† have been used to deal with nonparticipation. One way is to introduce elements of the combining arrangement by giving each learner in the group a different job to do. For example, one acts as the secretary to keep a record of decisions. One has the job of encouraging each learner to offer an opinion. One controls the various steps in the discussion procedure. Another way is to have a reward structure that gives the group responsibility for each individual's learning by rewarding the winning group rather than any individual in the group (Bejarano 1987). A third way to deal with non-participation is to change group size or the people in the groups to provide the optimum climate† in each group for participation to occur.

The superior-inferior arrangement

The superior-inferior arrangement in group work is a parallel to traditional class teaching. The essential feature of the arrangement is that one or more learners have all the information that the others in the group need. Here are two examples.

One learner has a complete text. The other learners have some important words from the text. By asking yes/no questions using those words as clues, the learners try to reconstruct the text.

One learner has a dictation text that she dictates to the others in the group. They write the dictation.

The best seating arrangement of the members of the group is with the person in the superior position facing the others. All the others should be an equal distance from the person with the information. Notice that this arrangement has parallels with the combining arrangement. The combining arrangement may

be viewed as a set of superior-inferior arrangements with every learner in the group having the chance to be in the superior position—that is, having information that others need and do not have.

The social relationship amongst the members of a superior-inferior group is one of inequality. The person with the information is in a superior position. This person may gain status from being in this position or may need to be a person with such status.

Research on peer teaching with native speakers (Allen 1976) shows that the superior-inferior arrangement can result in a lot of useful learning, particularly in pair work.

The most suitable tasks for superior-inferior group work include:

1. data gathering, e.g., interviews, questioning (Nation 1980);

2. providing directions, e.g., telling how to get to a place on the map, providing instructions about how to arrange parts to make a complete item;

3. completion.

The individual arrangement

In the individual group-work arrangement each learner has the same information but must perform individually with a part of that information. The *Say It!* exercise is a good example of this:

All the learners in a group can see a grid.† (See table 2.) Each section of the grid has a different task. The learners take turns to name a section of the grid, e.g., B1, and the next learner in the group has to carry out the task. The exercise is based on an article called "The World of a Tree" (*New Zealand School*

Journal, 1, 1, 1988). The learners would read it before doing the exercise.

Notice that, unlike the superior-inferior arrangement and combining arrangement, no learner has information that the others do not have. Unlike the cooperating arrangement, each learner makes an individual performance which is not necessarily helped by the others in the group. The major effects of the individual arrangement are to increase the time each learner can spend on a task, and to ensure that each learner participates.

The learners in the group need to have equal access to the material and be in sight of each other. Sitting in a circle is usually the most convenient.

The most suitable tasks for the individual arrangement in group work include:

1. solving problems, e.g., roleplay activities where each individual must perform in a certain way;

2. repetition, e.g., a chain story where learners retell the story to each other and see the changes that occur in retelling;

3. completion, e.g., each learner has to add a part to complete a story.

Applying the principle

Teachers sometimes feel uncertain about aspects of group work. Typical questions are "How many people should there be in a group?" "Is it best to have people of mixed proficiency or equal proficiency in a group?" "What sort of material do I need to prepare for group work?" The answers to these questions all depend on the principle of group work, that is, the five features

	1	2	3
A	What animals are helped by the tree?	What animals help the tree?	What animals hurt the tree?
B	Name five parts of a tree.	Explain why the tree is like a small world.	Explain what a twig is.
C	What is your favorite part of a tree? Why?	What is the biggest tree near us? Near your home?	How do trees help?

Table 2

must all be in agreement with each other. For example, the size of a group depends on the particular goal of group work, the type of information distribution that most suits the goal, and the seating arrangement that suits the information distribution. If the learning goal is to learn through negotiation of input, then a combining-arrangement distribution of information is most suitable and learners should work in pairs or groups of four or less with learners sitting near and facing each other.

Similarly, the question of mixed or equal proficiency is best answered by applying the principle. If the goal of learning is to master new language items, a superior-inferior arrangement with a more proficient learner in the superior position would be a useful choice. If, however, the goal is to develop fluency, groups could be made up of learners of equal proficiency in a cooperating arrangement.

If the principle is not applied, then group work will probably not go smoothly—for example, a cooperating arrangement with four or more learners sitting in a row or with two high-proficiency and two low-proficiency learners in a group, a fluency goal with a superior-inferior arrangement, or an individual arrangement with a finding-implications task.

Research on group work provides useful guidelines in applying the principle. Experience and experimentation in the classroom is equally valuable.

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