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Noxious Noise or Sweet Sound: Adjusting the Volume of Group Activities

Introduction

Group activities have become more common in second language instruction. For example, a few years ago I collaborated on a study comparing ESL coursebooks from the 1960s with those from the 1990s (Jacobs, Crookall, & Thiyaragarajali, 1997). My colleagues and I found many more group activities in the latter books. Key support for the increase in group activities lies in interactionist views of second language acquisition (Long, 1996; Pica, 1996). For instance, Swain (1999) argues that while learners need to receive large quantities of comprehensible input in order to develop proficiency in a second language, learners also need to produce output, via speaking and writing, in order to advance to higher levels of proficiency.

One reason that other second language teachers and I use group activities as part of our teaching is because such activities give students have many more opportunities to speak than when a teacher-fronted mode of instruction is used. I like to picture this example. If I am teaching a class of forty students, in the teacher-fronted mode, I will speak more than half of the time. Even when I call on individual students, for instance, to answer questions, only one student is speaking while the rest are, hopefully, listening. In contrast, picture this same classroom when group activities are used. Students are in 10 groups of four students each. Thus, when I am not talking, 10 students (one per group) are speaking. In this manner, group activities result in a geometric increase in my students' output.

However, this dramatic increase in learner talk brings with it a well-known issue: all those voices speaking as once may result in an increased noise level. Indeed, noise is frequently cited as one of the reasons to avoid group activities. Below are some suggestions for addressing this issue. I found most of these suggestions in the many books available on cooperative learning (e.g., Baloche, 1998; Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1993; Kagan, 1992; Slavin, 1995).

Suggestions

1. We should be prepared to tolerate a bit more noise as a price we are happy to pay for having so many students being active. There is such a thing as "good noise".
2. Students need to know how to vary their volume. When they speak in a group they should use group-size voices, that is, voices that can only be heard by groupmates who are nearby. The opposite of group-size voices are class-size voices can be heard by the whole class, for instance, when a student is to speak to the entire class. Some students get this backwards. In their groups, perhaps because they feel less

intimidated, they speak so loudly that everyone in the room can hear them, but when it's time to speak to the whole class, they suddenly become soft-spoken.

3. In order for group-size voices to work, students need to sit closely enough together so that they can speak softly and still be heard. Thus, students need to be encouraged to move their chairs or desks closer.
4. One way to make it easier for students to sit close together lies in students forming small groups. Remember, a pair is a group too. In fact, if we want to increase student output, two is the best size for groups. Students in a pair can sit close together even if the chairs in a classroom are bolted to the floor.
5. Each group can have a noise monitor. Here are some ideas for successful use of noise monitors.
 - a. Students learn how to be noise monitors. First, they need to understand why a low noise level is usually appropriate. Some reasons are: to not disturb to other groups or other classes, to not get sore throats, and to be calm, reasonable, and polite.
 - b. Students consider some of the different ways the skill of asking others to talk more quietly can look and sound. While this may differ from one culture to another, asking people to lower their volume could look like putting one's forefinger in front of one's lips and saying "shhhh" or moving one's hand downward with the palm facing the floor in a repeated manner.
 - c. As to what asking for lower volume sounds like, students quietly use certain phrases (also known as "gambits"), such as "Please speak more softly" and "Could you be a little quieter, please".
 - d. To practice these gestures and gambits, students do role plays in their groups in which each takes a turn to be a noisy student and each takes a turn to be the noise monitor.
 - e. Groups follow up on these role plays by discussing in their groups how well they did on maintaining a proper noise level. For instance, they each talk (in quiet voices, of course) about whether they ever spoke too loudly, and, if so, what caused this and how it can be remedied the next time.
 - f. The class persist in making the noise level a focus as long as it seems necessary and raising the matter if the problem reappears after initial improvement.
6. One cause of noise is more than one group member speaking at the same time. Yes, all group members should talk, but not all at the same time. Here are a few ideas on how can we encourage group members to take turns.

a. Many cooperative learning techniques designate turn taking. For instance, in Circle of Speakers, one student at a time speaks, going around the group, until each group member has had a turn.

b. Each group has one green card. Only the person with that card can speak. When others want to speak, they ask for the green card.

c. Students learn the collaborative skills of taking turns to speak, of listening while others are talking, and of not interrupting. These collaborative skills can be learned following the same steps as are used to teach the skill of asking others to speak more softly.

7. Students may be noisy because they do not know what to do or because they find the task too difficult. Make sure students know how to do the task and have the necessary knowledge and skills to do it, or know how to problem solve if they don't.

8. Some groups may finish early and start to make a lot of noise. I check to see that a group has indeed really done the task. If so, the group does a sponge activity. This can be some kind of enrichment activity on the same theme as the lesson. Alternatively, students could help other groups that are having more difficulty with the task, or they could develop their own sponge or have a regular sponge such as reading a book. Also, some activities are best stopped a bit before everyone has finished.

9. Many teachers have an attention signal they use when they want the class to stop talking and give their attention to the teacher. Another version of such a signal can be developed to say, "Please continue discussing, but do more quietly". Students use these same signals when they lead activities. Here are two examples.

a. Some teachers raise their hand as an attention signal. One adaptation on this is a raised hand with an open fist means, "Stop talking - attention to teacher" and a raised hand with a closed fist means, "Continue talking but please turn down the volume".

b. Other teachers put a check mark on the board as the signal for students to give their attention to the teacher. They use an arrow facing downward as the signal for lower volume.

10. Of course, the quietest way for students to share ideas is via the written word, either on paper or on a computer screen. Many cooperative learning techniques involving writing in at least part of the technique.

a. The written equivalent of Circle of Speakers is Circle of Writers. This technique can be used in many ways. For instance, each student can begin a story. After four minutes of writing, they pass the story to the person next to them, who reads what the other person has written and continues their story. In this way, each group member contributes to the story.

- b. Another CL technique that focuses on writing is Team Word-Web. Each group member contributes to their group's word web and each has a different colour pen or some other means of showing that a contribution is theirs.
- c. Written communication via computer can take many forms, including email, chat, exchange of electronic memory devices, sending attached files, Lists, and bulletin boards. Such computer-mediated communication can be part of many group activities.
- e. Writing can become one part of a cooperative learning activity. For example, Write-Pair-Switch consists of three elements: (1) students think alone and write out their ideas; (2) they discuss with a partner; (3) they switch partners and discuss with a different member of their group of four.
11. We can tell students that the discussions in their groups should be their secret. They can share their secrets with others later on.

Conclusion

Group activities have been very useful for me in my teaching. I cannot imagine teaching without them. However, I have faced many difficulties in using groups. To attempt to overcome these difficulties, I have turned to books and articles on cooperative learning and have attended many workshops and courses on cooperative learning. What I have tried to do in this article is to pass on a few of the ideas I have learned related to the particular issue of the noise level when group activities are used.

To conclude, let me return to the first suggestion I offered. I suggested that we teachers adjust our view. When our students are busily engaged in group activities, we should feel that our ears are hearing not noxious noise but the sweet sound of learning, and that we are not police officers trying to quiet a riotous crowd but orchestra conductors directing a beautiful symphony of learning. May you enjoy many lovely concerts!

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