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An Investigation of the Structure of Group Activities in ELT Coursebooks

Abstract

This article reports a study examining the use of group activities in English language coursebooks published since 1990. Ten coursebooks were randomly selected for examination. The number and percentage of group activities and of group activities rated as fostering cooperation were calculated. The results are discussed in light of theory and research on cooperative learning, task-based language teaching, and the roles of learners, teachers, and coursebooks. Suggestions are made for how group activities can better foster cooperation among group members.

Subject Index

Cooperative learning, materials design, task-based language teaching, group activities.

Introduction

There are three basic modes of classroom instruction: whole class, group (unless otherwise specified, the term "group" includes pairs), and individual. Each mode can contribute to learning. While whole class instruction remains the most common, the use of groups in education is a growing trend (e.g., Galton, 1990). The field of language education is no exception to this trend.

Theorists in both general education and language education, such as Dewey (1966), Long (1990), Piaget (1926), and Vygotsky (1978), emphasize the value of interaction for promoting learning. Based on theory and research in language education, Long (1990) cites five benefits of group activities in comparison with teacher-fronted whole class instruction: increased quantity of students' language use; enhanced quality of the language students use, e.g., the range of functions; more opportunity to individualize instruction; a less threatening environment in which to use language; and, greater motivation for learning.

Nevertheless, as Long points out, not all group work promotes learning. In this regard, in some ELT (English Language Teaching) coursebooks, it appears that group activities have been created merely by putting the words "In groups" or "In pairs" in front of what were formerly individual activities, without making any changes to encourage learners to cooperate with one another. Such instructions may

suffice in some situations. However, in many other cases, students may need more guidance and encouragement if effective interactions are to take place.

The purpose of the present study was to analyze the use of groups in recent ELT coursebooks and to make suggestions about how to enhance the effectiveness of group activities in language education materials. Two overlapping areas of inquiry - task-based language teaching (TBLT) and cooperative learning (CL) - provide insights into the circumstances and ways that group activities can be of benefit (Holt, 1993; Olsen & Kagan, 1992). These are reviewed below.

Review of Related Literature

Task-Based Language Teaching

Long (1990) proposes three distinctions that warrant attention in designing group tasks: planned or unplanned, closed or open, and one-way or two-way. Planned tasks are those in which students have time to plan the language they are going to use before interacting with other group members.

Long suggests that providing opportunities to plan can increase the quantity and quality of the language learners generate.

Closed tasks are ones for which students know there is one predetermined correct answer or small set of answers. Open tasks, conversely, are those for which there is no correct answer. Long believes that closed tasks enhance negotiation of meaning (actions taken to be sure that communication has been successful) among group members, because group members try to find the correct answer, rather than settling for any answer, and this tends to stimulate interaction. However, it is possible that the importance of the distinction between closed and open tasks might be an artefact of the artificiality of most classroom tasks and that students might be equally engaged in open tasks when they are allowed to choose topics or projects themselves.

Both one-way and two-way tasks involve an information gap in that information must flow between group members in order for the task to be completed. The difference lies in whether each group member needs to send as well as receive information in order to complete the task. Long (1990) hypothesizes that two-way tasks are better for promoting negotiation of meaning.

Cooperative Learning

Cooperative learning is a subset of group work methods. A large body of research suggests that properly structured cooperative learning activities are associated with positive educational outcomes (for reviews see Johnson & Johnson, 1989; Slavin, 1990). Definitions of cooperative learning vary widely (Sapon-Shevin & Schniedewind, 1992). However, two commonly agreed upon criteria for defining an activity as cooperative are positive interdependence and individual

accountability.

Johnson, Johnson, & Smith (1991: p.3:4-5) state that "positive interdependence exists when students *perceive* that they are linked with groupmates so that they cannot succeed unless their groupmates do (and vice versa) and/or that they must coordinate their efforts with the efforts of their groupmates to complete a task" (emphasis added). An example of an activity which does little to promote a perception of positive interdependence would be one in which students work on a task alone and then tell or show their product to groupmates.

The second common criterial element in cooperative learning is individual accountability. According to Johnson et al. (p. 3:8) this "exists when the performance of each individual student is assessed, the results given back to the individual and the group and the student is held responsible by groupmates for contributing his or her fair share to the group's success." The key here is to avoid the parallel problems of group member(s) who do nothing or group member(s) who do everything and discourage others from participating.

The Use of Groups in Textbooks

As we emphasized by italicizing the word "*perceive*" in the Johnson et al. definition of positive interdependence, learners' perceptions are the key to what kind of interaction takes place in groups; the textbook and the teacher, while certainly important, are only the facilitators. This is in line with constructivist views of knowledge (Bruner, 1966) which see learning as essentially an internal process by which people construct meaning, rather than, as in the behaviourist view, an external process in which textbook and teacher shape learners. By a similar process, students ultimately decide whether they feel positively interdependent and individually accountable in their groups. Indeed, research, e.g., Willis, 1977, illustrates how students may resist, even to their own seeming detriment, the well-intentioned efforts of the education system.

Thus, while it is important to examine how textbooks (the focus of this study) and teachers structure group activities, we must keep in mind that in the final analysis it is the students who decide what happens. For example, when giving tests teachers often go to elaborate lengths to prevent students from helping one another. Nevertheless, when teachers turn their backs, some students risk grades of F and worse to aid each other. Conversely, even a highly skilled teacher with the aid of excellent materials cannot guarantee beneficial interaction among a group of students, who, for example, may hate each other for reasons deriving from beyond the school walls.

The influence of the coursebook is potentially even more remote than that of the teacher, because teachers may ignore teachers manuals, prefaces to textbooks, and even the instructions in the students book. Indeed, using published

materials as sourcebooks rather than following them strictly is in line with current views of the role of the teacher (Richards, 1993), which see teachers as decision makers who, in consultation with learners, choose and adapt materials based on their own %of the learning process and on their students' needs. The complex relation between what teachers and textbooks say and what actually happens in classroom groups is depicted in Figure 1. In summary, while we can discuss how to design activities which encourage learning in groups, a group activity in a coursebook cannot be said to be cooperative or not; that decision lies with the group members.

Methodology

In the present study, the researchers sought to answer four questions:

1. What is the percentage of group activities in recent ELT coursebooks?
2. What do these coursebooks say about the number of learners per group?
3. What percentage of group activities can be labelled as fostering cooperation, based on the criteria developed by the researchers?
4. What are common shortcomings of group activities provided in coursebooks and how can these be overcome to enhance the probability of more effective student interaction?

To examine the current use of group activities in ELT textbooks, a computer search was conducted with the assistance of the Assistant Librarian of the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization Regional Language Centre in Singapore.

Using the Online Public Access Catalogue (OPAC), search commands were used to identify all the textbooks published since 1990 for the international market, rather than for use in a single country. Three hundred fifty-five titles were generated. A table of random numbers was used to select ten titles for use in the study. If a textbook had a teachers manual but it was not in the library's collection, that book was excluded. Of the ten books, two had teachers manuals.

As to when one activity ended and another began, in most cases the textbooks' demarcation was used. A group activity was defined as any activity in which students were asked (either in the teachers manual or the students book), at any point, to interact with one another in groups.

Group activities were rated as either fostering cooperation or not. To be rated as fostering cooperation, an activity needed to overtly encourage both positive interdependence and individual accountability according to rather weak definitions of those terms. To meet the positive interdependence criterion, an activity needed to encourage group members to interact by asking them to do something as a result of their interaction. For example, if group members were simply to discuss with one another, there was nothing overtly in the instructions to encourage the members to interact. Conversely, an activity was rated as fostering cooperation if they were asked by the

instructions to take action in response to each other, e.g., by answering a question or finding a place on a map.

To meet the individual accountability criterion, an activity needed to encourage groups to ensure that each member contributed. For instance, if the instructions asked the groups to work together to answer a set of questions, there was nothing overtly to encourage each member to contribute to answering the questions. On the other hand, an activity was rated as fostering cooperation if the instructions called on each member to individually share and explain their group's answers to a member of another group.

Inter-rater agreement for rating activities as group or non- group was determined by the two researchers independently rating 20 activities, 10 each from two books, and then comparing their ratings. Agreement on this measure was 100%. For rating activities as fostering cooperation or not, the same procedure was followed using 20 group activities. Agreement was 95%. The two researchers then divided the ten textbooks among themselves and rated the rest of the activities independently.

Results

The results of the rating of the 10 ELT coursebooks are reported in Table 1.

Table 1 - Numbers of Activities and Number and Percentage of Group Activities and Group Activities which Foster Cooperation across ELT Coursebooks

Coursebook	Activities	Group Activities	Activities That Foster Cooperation #
Begin et al. (1990)	130	62 (48%)	8 (13%)
Broughton (1990)	237	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Byrd et al. (1990)	206	1 (.5%)	0 (0%)
Cane et al. (1990)	171	18 (11%)	4 (22%)
Cunningham et al. (1992)	126	34 (27%)	21 (62%)
Gude & Nolasco (1991)	798	258 (32%)	97 (38%)
Hall & Foley (1990)	177	31 (18%)	25 (81%)
McGill et al.	97	42 (43%)	0 (0%)

(1990)			
Morley (1992)	41	18 (44%)	7 (39%)
Swan & Walter (1992)	317	196 (62%)	64 (33%)

Number and percentage of group activities that met criteria to be categorized as sufficiently fostering both positive interdependence and individual accountability.

With respect to group size, the coursebook authors generally recommended small numbers of members in group activities, with pair work or triads predominating in several texts. Overall, pairs were prescribed or suggested as an option in more than 50% of the group activities. Recommendations of groups consisting of five or more members were rare, and usually involved role plays and skits.

Discussion

The group activities which did not meet the researchers' criteria for fostering cooperation seemed to fall into two categories: those which did not sufficiently encourage positive interdependence, and those which did not sufficiently encourage individual accountability. It may bear repeating that group activities which do not meet the criteria may work very well; the researchers' goal was to see how materials writers, teachers, and group members can provide for those circumstances in which more structuring may be useful. Further, it is to be hoped that after sufficient successful group experiences, students will be able to work together without structuring by the teacher.

On the dimension of positive interdependence, typical of activities which did not meet the criterion were those which asked students to work alone first and then discuss or compare answers. Each person was asked to do something, but there was no explicit need for group members to interact. However, such activities do often meet Long's (1990) criterion of providing time for planning and do promote individual accountability.

There are many ways that activities of this type can be modified to encourage positive interdependence. A common way is to give each person unique information which must be combined in order to complete a group task, as in Jigsaw (Aronson, Blaney, Stephan, Sikes, & Snapp, 1978). Hall and Foley (1990: p. 39) do this when they provide two sets of three drawings each, one set upside down. The two group members are assigned one set each and first prepare to describe their pictures to their partner. The group's two-way task is to construct a single story combining all the pictures. Thinking Aloud assigns rotating roles as students complete a set of questions or exercises. One person does item #1 thinking aloud as they do so, while their partner acts as coach. The roles reverse for each subsequent item.

On the dimension of individual accountability, typical of activities which did not meet this criterion were those which asked groups to arrive at a single product, e.g., a list, an advertisement, a decision, without structuring or specifying the nature of the participation expected from each group member. Some of these activities did, however, meet the criterion for being classified as closed tasks, e.g., Swan and Walter (1992: p. 60) ask students to work in groups to decide whether sentences in the active or passive voice are appropriate.

There were many different means by which individual accountability was encouraged in the coursebooks used in this study. Morley (1992) had several good ideas for fostering full participation in group presentations: making sure each group member, not just a spokesperson, gives part of the presentation; having audience members ask questions of each group member and continue negotiating with the speaker until a satisfactory answer has been provided; and conducting a rehearsal at which members provide each other with feedback.

Often, the success of an activity may be a matter of providing sufficiently detailed guidance. Part of that guidance could entail a focus on enhancing learners ability to collaborate. Such skills include disagreeing politely, encouraging others to participate, asking for and providing reasons, and asking for and providing help. These skills facilitate group interaction at the same time that they allow learners to practice important language functions.

On the dimension of group size, the small number of members recommended for most group activities was in line with recent writing on cooperative learning pointing to the benefits of pair work and groups of three or four students for enhancing the opportunities for each member to participate actively and for reducing the complexity of group management. While small groups are favoured, larger groups have the advantage of increasing the diversity of contributions among members.

Groups of four, composed of two pairs who worked previously on a task related to the larger group activity, can work well. Among the books in this study, Gude and Nolasco (1991) sometimes used this procedure with a pair working together completing an assignment and then comparing their answer with another pair. To go a step further to encourage individual accountability, each member of a pair can be responsible for reporting their partners' ideas to the other pair.

Bird & Galligane (1990) was one of the books in the present study which used no or almost no group activities. In the introduction, the authors state that the materials were designed to encourage learner autonomy. Cooperative learning and learner autonomy might seem to be at cross-purposes, with the former encouraging students to learn together and the latter encouraging them to learn on their own.

However, when compared to the typical teacher-fronted classroom, cooperative learning can be clearly seen as a move toward learner autonomy because, as they collaborate with one another, students have greater autonomy from the teacher, who is usually the main power holder in the classroom. Further, there

is an important place for students to work alone as part of an overall group activity. In fact, individual accountability is designed to encourage learners to be responsible for their own learning.

Conclusions

The present study investigated the use of group activities in current ELT coursebooks. Overall, group activities were common. A study analyzing coursebooks from other decades would be necessary to say whether they are more common today than previously. However, the growing attention to groups in the literature on education suggests that they are.

The authors of the coursebooks used many imaginative means of encouraging learners to make the most of the advantages of collaboration. The researchers were impressed by the large number of good ideas they found while analyzing the materials. It has been suggested here that an examination of growing scholarship in TBLT and CL can provide materials writers and teachers with further suggestions.

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