Using Group Work to Facilitate Speaking in an Oral English Class in Japan: A Consideration of the Positive Benefits of such an Approach

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Introduction

Currently, Japan is embracing the concept of communicative language teaching with increasing passion. One of the practices of communicative language teaching is the use of group activities. However, the role of group work in the language classroom remains a controversial issue in language pedagogy. Its effectiveness in developing second language (L2) learners' speaking skills has been questioned by teachers and students alike.

This paper will first examine some of the reasons we use peer group work in the language classroom, and this will be followed by a look at the research to date in this area. The research to date has been inconclusive. Research done by Long et al. (1976), Pica and Doughty (1985), Long and Porter (1985), Doughty and Pica (1986), Rulon and McCreary (1986), Bejarano (1987), and Ling (1998) support the claim that peer group work is more effective in developing learners' speaking skills than teacher-fronted methods in the language classroom. Moreover, comparing the efficacy of peer group work with that of *L2 learner-native speaker* exchanges, research conducted by Pica et al. (1996: 55) shows that learners develop their speaking skills more adeptly through exchanges with native speakers than peers. However, the practical limitations of having only one native English speaker, the EFL teacher, available to classes with numerous students makes peer group work an attractive and somewhat necessary alternative to traditional teacher-led activities. With this in mind, even proponents of peer group work would admit that the practice of peer group work is not without its problems.

Townsend and Fu (1998: 9) discuss the problems students encounter when engaging in group speaking activities. They assert that students are often quiet and reluctant to speak due to their cultural inhibitions and personal insecurities (Townsend and Fu 1998: 9). The problems they describe are typical of those I have experienced in my oral English classes in Japan. While I support the practice of group work in the language classroom, I believe that it can be successful only when the learners overcome certain obstacles generally associated with peer group work. That is, they need to recognize the validity of communicative peer group tasks, they need to learn how to function in groups, and they need to overcome their fear of speaking. This paper will consider some

of these hurdles, and subsequently will offer some potential strategies on how to overcome them.

Students can overcome some of these obstacles by gaining experience working in groups, and by developing the conversational skills that are necessary in oral activities. These skills are what Japanese learners lack most in oral activities, often causing the group activity to break down. Conversational skills are basically a set of conversational rules and strategies which help learners to keep a conversation from breaking down (Dornyei and Thurrell 1994: 42). Conversational skills are helpful in ensuring successful oral group work for three main reasons. First, they maintain the flow of the group activity; second, they give students the confidence to speak; and ultimately, they enable students to participate more effectively in communicative group activities. Lastly, this paper will examine some practical variables which contribute to the effectiveness of a particular group task. Teachers must be aware of these variables as they exist in their classroom and adapt their lessons or tasks accordingly.

Why do we use group work in the language classroom?
The role of communicative language teaching

In early approaches to L2 teaching, language classroom practices were largely teacher-led and group activities were rarely used. The increasing practice of group work in the language classroom is largely attributable to the shift towards communicative language teaching in the early nineteen eighties (Bygate 1988: 59). Communicative language teaching is an approach which aims to achieve communicative competence in learners, and activities commonly used to achieve this aim involve group work.

The need for L2 learners' speaking practice in the language classrooms

Group work is seen as particularly helpful in developing learners' speaking skills. Swain (1985, cited in University of Leicester, 1999: Unit 6, 16) contends 'learning to speak is facilitated in a second language when learners are engaged in communicative activities - in other words learners learn to speak by speaking'. In Japan, it is speaking that is generally recognized as the most problematic area for English learners. Ellis (1991: 123) notes that the Japanese school graduate is in many respects seriously incompetent as an English speaker. Two factors in particular contribute to this incompetence. First, until recently Japan has been slow to adopt communicative approaches in the language classroom, and second there are limited L2 practice opportunities outside the classroom. For these reasons, private English conversation schools have been established in Japan. The focus of these schools is to develop the oral skills that the Japanese public school system failed to provide.

At the English conversation school where I work we have adopted the "communicative

approach", and group activities make up a large part of our lessons. While the communicative approach has certainly contributed to the increasing use of group work in language classrooms, it is beyond the scope of this paper. There are several practical reasons to use group activities in an oral English class. First and foremost, group work maximizes student talking time (STT), and minimizes teacher talking time (TTT). Consequently, students are able to practice speaking - the skill that they find most difficult. In a "communicative" classroom, there is less emphasis on habit formation and a greater tolerance for error. These attributes are thought to reduce students' anxiety. Students appear more relaxed speaking in peer groups than with the teacher. Thus when students engage in oral group tasks, they can focus on fluency skills and the function of language for that particular task. Further, group work is believed to encourage student motivation and participation (University of Leicester 1999: Unit 3, 31). In goal oriented group tasks, the communicative goal of the task is thought to motivate the student to achieve the objective. Peer interaction is believed to be stimulating for students thus it is thought to inspire increased learner participation in the language classroom (University of Leicester 1999: Unit 3, 31).

The importance of role plays and information routines

One of the most common types of group activities used in oral English classes are role plays and simulation exercises. These exercises are especially practical in Japan because Japanese students have minimal speaking practice opportunities outside the classroom. These activities are helpful in preparing students for the unpredictable uses of language in a variety of settings (University of Leicester 1999, Unit 6: 17). As there is such a great disparity between Japanese culture to that of Westerners, Japanese EFL learners often have extreme difficulties determining what to say in specific situations in English. Role play and simulation activities develop learners' speaking skills by helping them to establish information routines according to their situational context. Information routines are best viewed as commonly recurring ways of presenting information. After engaging in a role play, students should theoretically have the means with which to better predict what a similar conversation might entail in the future and hence will be better equipped to participate in such a conversation.

While the element of predicting is important, so too is the ability to make real time (spontaneous) responses to utterances which are not wholly predictable (Cunningsworth, 1984, reported in University of Leicester, 1999: Unit 6, 7). This ability to respond to utterances without unnatural hesitation is known in language pedagogical terms as *fluency*. The practice of role plays and simulation activities are helpful in improving students' fluency. The rationale is that students call upon information routines developed in role plays to respond more quickly and naturally in subsequent similar situations.

A look at the research: How do peer group activities compare to other methods in developing learners' speaking skills?

The research to date has been debatable. Some linguists contend that peer group work is not an effective method in developing learners' speaking skills, and other strategies would be more serviceable. For instance, Ellis (1984, cited in Bygate, 1988: 60) states that 'teachers and researchers do not consider "interlanguage talk" a suitable model for classroom SLD'. However, Ellis' assertion is challenged by research done in this area. Long and Porter (1985: 207) review a number of projects which lend support to the use of small group work in the language classroom. Generally, peer group work is considered to be an effective practice in the language classroom, but it remains uncertain to what extent. The following question begs asking. 'How does peer group work compare to teacher-led activities in developing learners' speaking skills?'

Peer group work vs. Teacher-led activities

Various studies comparing peer group work to teacher-led activities have been examined in Ling (1998). Pica and Doughty (1985, reported in Gass and Madden, 1985: 117) assist Ling (1998) by providing three types of analysis by which research in this area can be compared: negotiation of input/output, grammaticality of input/output, and the amount of input/output. Ling (1998) uses these criterions (three types of analysis) to demonstrate the support given by researchers towards group activities over teacher-led activities. Studies done by Pica and Doughty (1985), Rulon and McCreary (1986), and Doughty and Pica (1986, reported in Ling, 1998: 55) show that peer group work generates greater quantity of language and more negotiated output than teacher-fronted talk. Furthermore, Long et al.(1976, cited in Ling, 1998: 55) believe that peer group work is an attractive alternative to teacher-led methods because it produces L2 with a wider range of rhetorical purposes. Similarly, Bejarano (1987, referred to in Ling, 1998: 55) asserts that group work demonstrates greater effectiveness in developing language skills.

Peer group work vs. native speaker-nonnative speaker discourse

The opinions that Ling (1998) refers to in her article advocate that group work is a favorable alternative to other methods. However, these opinions are challenged by the results of a study done by Pica, Lincoln-Porter, Paninos, and Linnell (1996). Pica et al. (1996) focus their study on native speaker (NS)-nonnative speakers (NNS) discourse rather than teacher-led versus group talk. In their study, they sought to compare NS-NNS discourse with that of peer group work by measuring three of second language (L2) learners' professed needs: the modification of L2 input toward comprehensibility, the need for feedback focusing on form; and the modification of output - lexically, morphologically, and syntactically (Pica et al.1996: 79). Their findings suggest that L2

learner-NS interaction is more effective in developing L2 learners speaking skills than peer group work. Pica et al. (1996: 55) report that 'interaction between L2 learners can address some of their input, feedback, and output needs but that it does not provide as much modified input and feedback as interaction with NSs does'.

In practice, how do learners react to group work, and why?
Some problems generally associated with group work
Deviant L2 forms created by peer group work

The conclusions established by Pica et al (1996) are similar to the feelings shared by many Japanese learners. Generally, most Japanese learners believe that communicating with a native speaker is the best way for them to learn English. In my oral English class in Japan, many of my students seemed to lack initiative in peer groups. When I asked them why, students often expressed doubts about the positive effects of peer group work. The most common argument against peer group work is that it encourages deviant forms of the L2 to be produced. In other words, students are afraid that they will copy each others errors.

Aston (1986, paraphrased in Bygate, 1988: 76) gives examples 'of how negotiation of meaning by learners of a monolingual background can lead to the negotiated acceptance of non-standard rather than standard L2 forms'. Ellis (1984, cited in Bygate, 1988: 76) cites this as a reason that peer group work may not be a suitable practice in the language classroom. However, this claim has been heavily scrutinized in the field of language pedagogy. The resulting L2 deviant forms from student-student exchanges, have not been proven to be peculiar to peer group discourse. Rather, these L2 deviant forms can occur as a result of any language activity. In fact, the causes of deviance in the L2 have been associated as much with teacher-centered methods as other methods used in the language classroom (Ellis 1984, George 1972, and Lightbown 1985; referred to in Bygate, 1988: 76). Studies in this area have not shown peer group work to cause deviant L2 forms any more than other activity types practiced in the language classroom. Thus at this point in time, teachers would perhaps be better served in considering other problem areas involving group work.

Learners' reluctance to speak in groups

Another significant problem generally associated with the practice of peer group work is the students' reluctance to speak in communicative activities. For Japanese learners, this fear of speaking can be attributed to several reasons. One explanation suggested is that Japanese learners are simply not used to learning in an interactive environment. In fact, speaking in class is generally considered disrespectful in Japan. 'Some studies have shown that an interactive approach may be incongruent with some Asian family literacy and language patterns' (Trueba 1990; cited in

Townsend and Fu, 1998: 17). However, this can also be seen in a positive light. Many teachers contend that this unfamiliar type of learning method (interactive) is a refreshing change for learners. Fu (1995: 199) asserts that students are fascinated by the high level of freedom that this method provides.

Besides lacking experience learning in peer groups, Japanese learners also lack sociolinguistic knowledge in the L2. This has also been suggested as a reason that learners are hesitant to speak in peer group situations. They do not know what to say in specific situations, and this causes them to be apprehensive. Ferris and Tagg (1996: 310) describe these fears as 'cultural inhibitions'. Generally, these fears are associated with NS-NNS discourse, however they can arise anytime the learner is engaging in L2 conversation. Communicative group activities require conversational skills, which are precisely what Japanese learners lack. Students need to develop their skills in this area to feel more comfortable speaking in group conversations.

Overcoming the problems: The development of conversational skills to enhance L2 communicative group work

To enhance the success of learning in groups, Japanese learners have to overcome the following three obstacles associated with group work: they have to believe in the value of group work, they have to learn how to function in groups, and they have to be willing to take the initiative to speak. These hurdles are closely related in the sense that they can be overcome the same way. As students gain experience learning in groups, it is reasonable to assume that they will improve in all of the above-mentioned problem areas. They will be able to experience the value of group learning, as well as develop their own strategies to be more effective in the group. However, there are ways to strengthen and speed up the learning process. Japanese learners need to develop *conversational skills* to be effective in peer group communicative tasks. These skills give students the means and the confidence to participate in communicative group tasks.

The direct approach to teaching conversation skills

Richards (1990: 76) points out two approaches to teaching conversational skills: an indirect approach, and a direct approach. An indirect approach involves students engaging in conversational interaction as a means of achieving conversational competence. This approach is typical of the teaching practices currently found in Japan's English conversation schools. Activities such as role plays, problem solving tasks, and information-gap exercises are commonly used in this approach. These activities can also be used in the methods of a direct approach. However, a direct approach differs in that it provides learners with more input of specific language, and consciousness raising information about the L2. Richards (1990: 77) describes a *direct approach* 'to involve planning a

conversation around microskills, strategies, and processes that are involved in fluent conversation'.

In my opinion, a direct approach (focusing on *specific language input* and *consciousness raising*) would be the most beneficial approach in developing Japanese learners' L2 conversational skills. Japanese learners need to be taught the strategies and rules of conversation to be more successful in communicative group activities. Often when engaging in peer group activities, my students are not sure (*consciously aware*) of what to say in specific situations. They are lacking the *specific language input* to continue participating in the conversation. Consequently, the conversation often breaks down thus causing the group activity to come to an abrupt and unnatural halt. In practice, a direct approach would involve teachers carrying out specific activities to raise consciousness and provide specific language input for the learner. If the specific group task was a role play for example, a simple technique would be for the teacher to specify a number of different phrases to be included in the performance (Dornyei and Thurrell 1994: 47). By considering the teacher's feedback, and participating in this type of activity, learners would be able to identify specifically where the phrases belong in the conversation.

Conversational rules and strategies

Japanese L2 learners have a difficult time maintaining the flow of a conversation. Too often, interaction in groups is filled with long silences sometimes causing the conversation to prematurely end, or for the students to speak in their native tongue. One of the methods suggested in maintaining the flow of a conversation is to teach learners a set of conversational rules, and strategies (Ellis 1991: 123). Dornyei and Thurrell (1994: 42-45) break down the skills found in a conversation into smaller components (subskills). From these subskills, Dornyei and Thurrell (1994: 42-45) develop both a list of conversational rules and a list of conversational strategies that can be used as a theory-based syllabus for conversation courses. Their list of **conversational rules** includes the following categories: *openings, turn-taking, interrupting, topic-shift, closings*; while their list of **conversational strategies** include categories such as *message adjustments, paraphrase, approximation, appeal for help, asking for repetition, asking for clarification, interpretive summary, confirmation, and hesitation devices* (Dornyei and Thurrell 1994: 42-45).

Dornyei and Thurrell's (1994) lists pinpoint the areas in which L2 learners struggle to maintain the flow of a conversation. Take for example an oral group activity that abruptly comes to a halt because a student cannot think to say "could you repeat that please" or "what do you mean by that". Here, the two areas of difficulty are *asking for repetition and appealing for help*. Their lists provide teachers with a guide to help them identify these specific problems. Consequently, teachers can better address the specific needs of the student. Generally, conversational rules and strategies are best learnt through consciousness raising activities. Dornyei and Thurrell (1994: 42) assert that

many of these skills do not come automatically. Rather, 'they need to be developed consciously through awareness-raising activities and/or taped authentic conversation' (Dornyei and Thurrell 1994: 42).

Some practical variables which affect the success of the group work

While a direct approach (focusing on input of specific language and raising consciousness) may be the best suited theoretical approach to enhance oral group work, there remain many practical factors to consider. Successful group work in the language classroom is dependant on these practical variables. To ensure successful learning in peer groups, teachers must be aware of these elements and adjust their tasks to best suit them. Based on my experience, the following variables play a significant role in determining the effectiveness of a group activity:

Classroom organization. English classes in the Japanese public school system typically have a high number of students, and space is always limited. Teachers must consider the number of students in the class and the space available to them when they are preparing a group activity. At my oral English school, our classes generally have a low number of students, but our space is limited also. Small classes enable us to use small groups. My school favors the use of small group work for two practical reasons. First, it gives students ample opportunity to speak; second, the teacher is able to monitor the activity easily. However, the latter may be more difficult to accomplish in a class with a large number of students. Teachers have to position themselves where they can monitor the group activities so they can provide subsequent feedback. Additionally, teachers often have to prepare supplemental materials to enhance the success of a particular activity. For role plays in my oral English class, I often use props and other accessories in an attempt to further simulate real life situations.

Participants. Without question, any educational setting will consist of several different types of learners. While students' ages, levels of competence in the L2, and experience working in groups certainly have a large impact; learners' personalities and attitudes perhaps have the greatest effect on what happens in the group. Wright (1987, cited in University of Leicester, 1999: Unit 2, 18) points out that ' individuals will bring with them to a group their own set of expectations about how others will act and what roles they will take on - in other words, they are bringing with them all their social, cultural, and psychological baggage'. While it is difficult for teachers to cater their lessons to suit specific students, teachers should identify potential problems and make the necessary adjustments. In my oral English class, some students display a negative attitude towards group work. They either lack experience working in groups, or believe that discourse with a native speaker is the best method for them to learn. Their unwillingness to cooperate causes other students to feel uncomfortable, and ultimately hurts the chances of effective group work. In such cases, I

often include myself in the group in hopes of stimulating the students' participation, and demonstrating the teacher-student equality that group work bears.

Experience learning in groups. Many learners in Japan have limited experience working in groups in educational settings. Teachers should not take for granted that the group activities will always be successful in the early going. Rather, they should be prepared for the growing pains that are often involved when assimilating learners to new methods. Furthermore, teachers can take extra measures to prepare students for group activities. Regarding the development of oral skills, I have suggested the development of conversational skills is needed for students to participate in groups more effectively. An alternative method would be for students to observe group activities practiced by more experienced group learners. This could be done by video tape or by observing the group activities of more experienced group learners in the same school. This would allow the student to witness first hand the positive benefits of group work, and it would also provide them with a better idea of how to function effectively in a group setting.

Roles for the learner. It is important that students realize their role and function in the group activity. Teachers should give clear directions identifying these areas for learners. Also, teachers should choose the student combinations in a group carefully. By this, teachers should avoid grouping many weak students together. It is generally considered advantageous to group higher level students with lower level students. The rationale is that the higher level students will be able to help the lower level students, as well as themselves. By developing alternative ways of articulating their ideas, higher level students are increasing their range of language that can be used in a particular situation.

The specific group task. Another of the variables which effects the success of group work is the specific activity chosen by the teacher. Brown (1991) suggests that the level of challenge of a task is an important variable in the overall success of the activity. Unquestionably, teachers must adhere their specific group activities to suit the abilities of their students. While this notion seems obvious, it is not always the standard practice by teachers. Teachers sometimes impose tasks that are too difficult for students. This is detrimental to group work for two reasons. It can cause students to lose confidence in their abilities, and it can cause students to question the value of group work. Having success in the group activity is essential for students, especially in the early going. Successful tasks result in students gaining confidence in their abilities, and also in the value of group work.

Conclusion

While the practice of group work remains a controversial issue in language pedagogy, there are several practical reasons for its use in Japan's English classes. In particular, oral group activities

allow students more L2 speaking practice. Arguably, this is what the Japanese EFL learner needs most. As Japanese EFL learners have limited opportunities to practice speaking English in Japan, oral group activities can be helpful in addressing this need. Although the research determining the overall effectiveness of group work has been challenged by many linguists; it has, in my opinion, been able to provide justification for the future use of group work in the language classroom. The research to date shows that peer group work does in fact enhance students' L2 speaking skills (Ling 1998: 55), albeit not as much as L2 learners interaction with native speakers does (Pica et al. 1996: 55). Clearly, it would not be economically possible to provide each group with a native speaker, nor would it be practical for the entire class to engage in a conversation with the teacher. As many English classes in Japan are taught by nonnative speakers, peer group work seems to be a necessary, if not favorable alternative in developing L2 speaking skills in Japan. Still, however, many problems arise when Japanese EFL learners engage in oral group activities. Generally, these problems occur for two reasons that are closely related: the Japanese EFL learner's reluctance to accept the value of oral group work, and the inexperience of the Japanese EFL learner working in groups. As Japanese EFL learners experience the positive benefits of group work, their attitude towards group work will improve. To ensure successful group work, I have proposed that Japanese L2 learners need to be taught how to function in groups. I believe this can be accomplished by teaching them L2 conversational skills. These skills are necessary in maintaining the flow of oral group activities. Teachers can further enhance the success of a group activity by identifying the distinctive practical variables of their situation, and adapting their group activities to best suit their individual situation.

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