

Group Discussion in an ESL Classroom: A Socio-cultural Perspective

M. R. Vishwanathan, M.A. (English), PGDTE, M.Phil. (ELT), Ph.D. (ELT)

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Abstract

The benefits of Group Discussion (GD) and its importance as a parameter for judging a potential candidate's performance in interviews have long been recognized, and GD has been accorded a place of honour in the 'English' curriculum of engineering colleges.

Recruiters have in recent times used GD as a yardstick for judging a prospective candidate's potential for a job with the company since communication skills have come to be regarded as a requirement for performing well on the job. The globalised nature of work culture implies that soft skills in general and negotiation skills in particular are insisted on by employers and communication skills are increasingly seen as a passport to fulfilling jobs in Multinational companies.

Yet the non-participation of some learners in a GD may be attributed to socio-cultural factors that need to be examined to understand the reasons for non-participation and find ways to invite better participation from the silent learners without making them feel ashamed or alienated in any way.

Keywords: GD, second language classroom, CLT, socio-cultural factors

Scene 1:

Inside campus bus: I was witness to a strange incident while travelling to college by college bus. The bus I was travelling in stopped at a place to pick up passengers *en route* to college and on the particular day, there were several vacant seats since several *three seaters* were occupied by a lone passenger. Yet those who got in, all of them boys were standing at the footboard or huddled near the driver's area. When asked to occupy the vacant seats, they refused. Curiosity set me asking them the reason.

All the boys said in unison: “*Sir, akkada ladies unnaru* meaning (Sir, the seats are occupied by girls). It was evident that these boys followed the general idea of segregation practised all over India, and were simply following what they had been doing all along. None wanted to sit next to girls either from shyness or from fear of being mocked or fear of resistance from girls. The disparity in world views in major cities and other parts of the world could not have being more striking.

Scene 2:

ELCS lab: A GD session in progress; several students keep mum or simply say, “Sir, I don’t want to speak.” Among whom are passengers who refused to sit next to girls. Despite threats of poor marks for non-participation, they refuse to open up. The bus incident floats in my mind’s eye and I refuse to read defiance in their reaction. I suspect it may be for reasons beyond my purview and I choose to investigate.

Role of Group Discussion

Group discussion has a crucial role to play in improving learners’ fluency in a second /foreign language. The advent of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) as a popular teaching approach only aided the reverence with which CLT was held by curriculum designers. CLT advocates the teaching-learning of a second language in a natural setting where learners learn a second /foreign language in a non-threatening environment. As has been rightly observed by Freeman (2008), “The most obvious characteristic of CLT is that almost everything that is done is done with a communicative intent (p.129). It is therefore an approach that believes that “students should be given an opportunity to express their ideas and opinions “(Freeman, 2008, p.126) so that through active participation in communicative activities with the teacher as facilitator, a lot of authentic speaking happens and there is negotiation of meaning between and among learners.

Team Activity

Of the several activities available to learners to choose from in order to improve their spoken English, GD is perhaps the most convenient and sought after because it is a team activity that “encourages cooperative relationships among students. It gives students an opportunity to work on negotiating meaning (Freeman, 2008, p.127).

Job-winning Performance

The importance of Group Discussion may be gauged from the fact that companies like Amazon, IBM, Broadcom, and Schlumberger recruit employees based on their performance in GD. Business schools look for communication skills and GDs are often the clinchers. Then again, several organizations look for PR personnel who apart from excelling in academics and on the job, need to reveal to the public the human face of the company or organization.

GDs, debates, and JAMs therefore play a vital role in determining a candidate's success in landing that plum job, a promotion or posting abroad. English departments thus have a special job on their hands - promoting GD as an activity involving all learners and ensuring a learner-friendly ambience. The idea is to minimise teacher intervention or interference and maximize learner participation. GD encourages team work, tolerance and adapting to several points of view while sticking to one's own. It is for this GD counts as an important soft skill.

Green et al (1997) very appropriately list out what it takes to make a GD successful in any context, be it ESL or EFL:

Discussions depend for success primarily on the willingness of all the participants to make substantial and coherent contributions to the process. Individual contributions depend on a knowledge or experience of the topic under discussion, willingness to express oneself in the target language and personality type (p.137).

Silence versus Speech

The question is therefore one of finding out why learners prefer silence over speech. To read silence as arrogance, defiance of authority or simply indifference is to indulge in unnecessary paranoia and treat GD as the be-all and end-all of language acquisition, which is not the case. Silence on the part of learners may be embedded in the socio-cultural milieu in which learners have grown up and been educated. It was abundantly clear that learner silence was indeed a problem that transcended the limited world view of a teacher, prone to see it as learner non-cooperation or indifference.

Present Study

This study was conducted to decode the ‘speech’ behind silence, and the student-teacher reaction to teacher speech. The study is not the first of its kind since “classroom silence, particularly among Asian EFL learners, continues to attract discussion” (Harumi, 2011, p.260) and Indian students are not alone in being seen as scapegoats for what is a socio-cultural phenomenon.

Informal talk with students outside the classroom brought to light factors other than what has been commonly but mistakenly attributed to learner silence in the language lab.

The Study

The study was conducted on 40 students in their first year of engineering in a college affiliated to a state university in Telangana State. I had been teaching them lab for over a month and the silence I encountered consistently from a group (of about 20 *stubborn* learners) led to the study. The study was in the form of informal talk with the learners to find out the reasons for reticence. Data analysis revealed a plethora of reasons for their unwillingness to communicate, almost all of them showing a tendency to reticence because of cultural or acquired or inherited traits.

Lack of Confidence

The first reason was “lack of confidence in self-expression” (Harumi, 2011, p.264). This is a cultural basis since in the Indian context, it is always the tradition for the teacher to talk and learner to listen and take down notes. A teacher who is eager to let students *seize* control of the class room is viewed as lazy, ignorant or incompetent. As classrooms have remained teacher-fronted for as long as anyone can remember and throughout history, it is but natural for students to remain ‘passive’ and let the teacher take over.

Harumi (2011) observes that in Japanese EFL classrooms learner-silence “stems from the presence of other students or the classroom atmosphere” (p. 264). This was particularly true in the ESL lab which had a sizeable number of girl students. It was simply unbearable for boys to subject themselves to assessment or review of their performance in the presence of girls. It is understandable considering the high levels of patriarchy.

Assumption of Unequal Contest

Learners who were silent saw the discussion activity as an unequal contest between the most able and the least, which was true. It was a heterogeneous class that had learners whose levels of linguistic competence were high just as there were learners who were only then coming to grips with English. Weak users of English saw GD as a context pitting gun fighters against knife throwers. They were hesitant to share their views or opinions in poor English. They wanted an opportunity to use their mother tongue, at least in the first few classes, to get over their shyness and inhibitions. The silence was neither a result of ignorance nor defiance or indifference but one resulting from diffidence.

Low Self-esteem which Led to Preference of Silence Over Participation

Learners who preferred silence to participation, it came through, had low self-esteem. They didn't want to lose face by coming off badly through participation. They blamed it on their poor grammar, fewer vocabulary, limited powers of expression and the attendant tension as reasons for non-participation. It was also a sign from the learners for the teacher to pitch in and help them out at crucial junctures such as helping them with ideas, supply words when they are lost for it, add ideas or supplement ideas so as to assure learners that with a little help, they too can perform well.

Respect for Elders

The fourth reason for silence was again cultural: Learners had been taught from childhood that respect for elders was of the essence and that one's own views must be subordinated to those of one's teachers and parents. They were thus naturally inclined to accept teacher's views as paramount and preferred to listen than butt in or participate all too enthusiastically. No student wanted to be seen as a Mr. Know-it-all and embarrass the teacher.

An Expression of Unity and Solidarity

Surprisingly, silence was used by the group members as an expression of unity too. All the learners applauded themselves in the thought that collective insults were not all anything to fret about. They sought and had security in the group they identified themselves with. This is very similar to though not a replica of a "Japanese cultural norm, wa (harmony) or 'groupism': the opinion of a group is valued more highly than that of the individual"

(Harumi, 2011, p.265). Thus, even if a few members of the group are in a position to answer or take part in GD, the unwillingness of others condemns them to silence too. This “distancing strategy” (Flowerdew, 1998, p.323) somehow seemed to work well to take the guilt off non-participation.

Implications and Suggested Measures

GD being an inevitable part curriculum and a necessary component of English language lab, one mustn't look for reasons that can explain away learner non-participation. Instead a few measures may be put in place that address the issue of non-participation in GD and suggest measures to overcome reluctance and diffidence in learners.

a. It is a great help to start any GD with a preface; classroom observation holds that teachers plunge straightaway into GD and hand out topics for learners to speak on. In some cases, the dos and don'ts of GD are never given to learners, leading them to treat the whole exercise with indifference. The usefulness of GD and its place in the recruitment process should serve as an incentive for learners to participate actively in it; besides, learners would also be told how it would lead them to improving their social skills, such as turn-taking, modulation of voice, adjusting body language, etc.

b. Judicious use of L1 must be allowed; an L2 classroom often jettisons L1 use. This results in learners being deprived of a rich resource to use and benefit from. Learners who have had all their education in regional medium schools deserve better than being forced to use English from the very beginning of their school year. Everyone including the fluent users of English must be asked to use L1 even if occasionally so that none feels ridiculed for using L1. In any GD outside the classroom, code switching is very common and it doesn't hurt to use one's mother tongue.

c. Learners learn best when they have a free hand in choosing discussion topics, “deriving principally from their current professional, academic or developmental concerns” (Green et al, 1997, p.137). This gives them a sense of freedom and responsibility. It lets learners draw up points, brainstorm and contribute positively to GD than if topics are chosen by the teacher.

d. Finally, silent learners must be grouped into one category and encouraged to come out of their shell. This will “lead the more introverted student away from his or her concern with rule obedience and correctness to a more unself conscious and fluent expression of personal knowledge and views” (Green et al, 1997, p.137).

Conclusion

It hardly needs emphasising that while GD as an essential component of lab is needed for conversational fluency and making the learners job-ready, the socio-cultural aspects need to be taken into account to achieve the objective. To make participation in GD inclusive measures suggested above may be adopted. These measures will render the activity meaningful and productive for all.

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M. R. Vishwanathan, M.A. (English), PGDTE, M.Phil. (ELT), Ph.D. (ELT)
Assistant Professor (English)
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
National Institute of Technology
Warangal – 506004
Telangana
India
vishwanathanmrv@gmail.com