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GROUP WORK AS AN EFFECTIVE METHOD FOR SPECIALIZED TEXT COMPREHENSION IN ESP CLASSROOM

ABSTRACT

Group work is undoubtedly considered to be a potential tool in a foreign language learning classroom as it contributes to forming and developing language as well as communicative competence of learners. It can be applied not only to teaching grammar and lexical skills, for the introduction and revision of new material but also to working with a text to improve text comprehension. In case of academic or specialized texts, group work has proven to be essentially productive as it contributes improvement of students' communicative skills, boosts students' knowledge of their areas of study, and, last but not least, increases their English language competence in professional settings.

Key words: *group work, English for Special Purposes, academic text, specialized text, text comprehension, communicative skills.*

РЕЗЮМЕ
ГРУППОВАЯ РАБОТА КАК ЭФФЕКТИВНОЕ СРЕДСТВО ПОНИМАНИЯ СПЕЦИАЛИЗИРОВАННОГО ТЕКСТА НА УРОКАХ АНГЛИЙСКОГО ЯЗЫКА ДЛЯ СПЕЦИАЛЬНЫХ ЦЕЛЕЙ

Групповая работа несомненно считается потенциальным инструментом на уроках инностранного языка, так как она способствует формированию и развитию как языковых, так и коммуникативных навыков студентов. Групповая работа может применяться не только для обучения грамматическим и лексическим навыкам, для введения нового материала и его повтора, но и для работы над текстом для улучшения его понимания. В случае с академическим или специализированным текстом групповая работа более чем продуктивна, так как она способствует развитию коммуникативных навыков студентов, расширению знаний в области их специализации, и, наконец, что немаловажно, повышению уровня знаний в области английского как языка специального.

ԱՄՓՈՓՈՒՄ
ԽՄԲԱՅԻՆ ԱՇԽԱՏԱՆՔԸ ՈՐՊԵՍ ՄԱՍՆԱԳԻՏԱԿԱՆ ՏԵՔՍՏԵՐԻ ԸՆԿԱԼՄԱՆ ԱՐԴՅՈՒՆԱՎԵՏ ՄԻՋՈՑ ՀԱՏՈՒԿ ՆՊԱՏԱԿՆԵՐՈՎ ԱՆԳԼԵՐԵՆԻ ԴԱՍԱՎԱՆԴՄԱՆ ԼՍԱՐԱՆՆԵՐՈՒՄ

Խմբային աշխատանքն օտար լեզվի դասավանդման արդյունավետ մի-ջոց է, քանի որ նպաստում է ուսանողների լեզվական և հաղորդակցական հմտությունների ձևավորմանն ու զարգացմանը: Այն կարող է կիրառվել ոչ միայն քերականական և բառային գիտելիքների դասավանդման, նոր նյութի ներմուծման և կրկնության համար, այլ տեքստերի հետ աշխատելիս՝ զարգացնելու դրանց ընկալման հմտությունները: Ակադեմիական և մասնագի-տական տեքստերի դեպքում խմբային աշխատանքն էլ ավելի արդյունավետ է, քանի որ նպաստում է հաղորդակցական հմտությունների զարգացմանը, մաս-նագիտական գիտելիքի կուտակմանը, ինչպես նաև անգլերենի կիրառման խթանմանը մասնագիտական ոլորտում:

Բանալի բառեր' *խմբային աշխատանք, անգլերենը հատուկ նպատակ-ների համար, ակադեմիական տեքստ, մասնագիտական տեքստ, տեքստի ընկալում, հաղորդակցական հմտություններ:*

Group work implies the involvement of all students in the process of learning. Within the framework of this collaborative activity, each learner has his/her own investment and input into the learning process which includes exchange of knowledge, skills and expertise.

In theoretical terms, group work is a strategy that enables students to discuss issues or to engage in joint activities with other students in a less threatening environment (Harmer, 1991). Group work essentially involves the learners in interaction activities which is an important aspect of the

language-learning process, as it gives learners the opportunity to negotiate meaning; this leads to positive developmental effects and an increase in a comprehensible input, pushed output (Richards, 2005; Ellis, 1994). Hall and Hewings suggest that learning a language is a process which develops through interaction between learners, teachers, texts and activities (Hall and Hewings, 2001). However, Ellis concludes that learner-learner interaction is more effective than teacher-learner interaction in helping learners to acquire L2 (Ellis, 1994).

The advantages of group work are as follows:

1. Learners can themselves identify problems and find solutions to them.

2. Learners have an opportunity to form and express their own ideas.

3. Students learn to interact with each other, with the teacher, thus they obtain communicative skills and abilities.

4. Students encourage each other especially in mixed level classes. When lower level students see the accomplishments of higher level students, they get inspired and motivated.

5. Not all learners are willing to ask the teacher a question if they do not understand something. Working in small groups enables students to ask each other the questions that are not clear to them.

There are many types of group work activities, depending on the nature of the task that should be accomplished. For example, the purpose of *buzz groups* is to generate ideas, stimulate students' interest and assess students' understanding. These groups involve students engaging in short, informal discussions, often in response to a particular question. The best discussions are those in which students make judgments regarding the relative merits, relevance, or usefulness of an aspect of the lecture (Brookfield, Preskill, 1999).

Another group activity is *think-pair-share* which aims at generating ideas, increasing students' confidence in their answers, encouraging participation in public speaking. It consists of three steps. First, students think

individually about a particular question or scenario. Then they pair up to discuss and compare their ideas. Finally, they are given the chance to share their ideas in a large class discussion. Think-pair-sharing forces all students to attempt an initial response to the question, which they can then clarify and expand as they collaborate. It also gives them a chance to validate their ideas in a small group before mentioning them to the large group, which may help shy students feel more confident participating.

The goal of the group activity called *circle of voices* is again to generate ideas, develop listening skills, have all students participate and equalize learning environment. This method involves students taking turns to speak. Students form circles of four or five and are given a topic, and they should organize their thoughts about it. Then the discussion begins and each student should express his/her opinion. During this time, no one else is allowed to say anything. After everyone has spoken once, a general discussion involving all the students can be organized (Brookfield, Preskill, 1999). To encourage students to listen more carefully to each other, the teacher can require each person to begin by paraphrasing the comments of the previous student or by showing how his or her remarks relate to those of the previous student.

Snowball groups/pyramids is another type of group activity, the aim of which is to generate ideas, to narrow a topic and develop decision-making skills. This method involves progressive doubling: students first work alone, then in pairs, then in fours, and so on. In most cases, after working in fours, students come together for a plenary session in which their conclusions or solutions are pooled. Back in the large class group, one representative from each group reports the group's conclusions (Jaques, 2000).

The purpose of *jigsaw* is to learn concepts in-depth and develop teamwork. This activity involves students becoming "experts" on one aspect of a topic, then sharing their expertise with others. A topic should be divided into a few constitutive parts ("puzzle pieces"). Subgroups of students should be given a different "piece" of the topic. Each group's task is to develop expertise on its particular subtopic by brainstorming, developing ideas and

researching. Once students have become experts on a particular subtopic, the groups should be shuffled so that the members of each new group have a different area of expertise. Students then take turns sharing their expertise with the other group members, thereby creating a completed "puzzle" of knowledge about the main topic (Silberman, 1996).

Fishbowl is a type of group work and its objective is to observe group interaction, provide real illustrations for concepts and an opportunity for analysis. It involves one group observing another group. The first group forms a circle and either discusses an issue or topic, does a role play, or performs a brief drama. The second group forms a circle around the inner group. Depending on the inner group's task and the context of the course, the outer group can look for themes, patterns, soundness of argument, etc., in the inner group's discussion, analyze the inner group's functioning as a group, or simply watch and comment on the role play (Jaques, 2000).

Obviously, this list of types of group work activities can be continuously replenished as every teacher might think of new approaches and techniques when organizing group work in foreign language classroom.

However, when organizing group work activity related to specialized text comprehension, some principles of setting up groups should be taken into consideration. First of all, it is worth mentioning that for this type of activities it would be reasonable to involve from 4 to 5 students in a group. Secondly, the level of competence of students should be different in a group, ranging from students with high to low level language competence, as it will help the teacher to allocate different roles to different students (for example, a student with low language competence will not be able to be cooperative enough to lead the group). Thirdly, the ability to complete certain tasks and the pace of learning and working should also be taken into account. The texts for group work should be focused on a discussable problem which, in its turn, can contribute to forming a lot of opinions. The contents of the text should be well-suited so that the teacher could distribute the assignments to different students to work individually. As some researchers mention, assigning a

single role to each member of the group may be more effective in achieving successful group work and it will be efficient if every member has something specific to do, such as asking for and giving information, giving examples, synthesizing and summarizing, and taking notes and recording information (McCafferty et al., 2006; Cohen, 1994). Dörnyei and Murphey suggest that specifying roles for each member may improve the learning, as well as promote the development of different abilities; moreover, it may decrease the anxiety of group members, as they know what they are expected to do (Dörnyei, Murphey, 2003).

Another important issue that should be considered here is the assessment of students which is an important part of group work activities, alongside with material selection, assignments that should be completed as well as constant reflection on the studied material. Some researchers tend to think that when assessing students the teacher should take into account both factors – the final work result of students and the process of their interaction (Brown, 2001; Thornbury, 2005). Harmer suggests working out the principles of assessment based not only on language competence but also communicative skills, for example the skill of solving problems, actively interacting with other group members as well as following communication principles, etc. (Harmer, 2007). And despite the fact that students work together, support and help each other, each of them has his/her portion of successful and unsuccessful answers, poor and good performance. That is why the teacher's task should be identifying the mistakes and properly assessing each student's answer.

There are some stages that should be adhered to when implementing group work activity for specialized text reading comprehension:

1. setting up groups;
2. new material introduction;
3. group work planning;
4. individual work planning;
5. discussion of tasks completed by separate students;

6. discussion of tasks completed by the whole group which implies remarks, completions, clarifications and generalizations;

7. finalizing group work results;

8. reflection on the cognition process;

9. teacher assessment.

Working with a specialized text within the framework of group activities has proven to be very productive in many ways. It heavily contributes to improving communicative skills of students, boosts students' knowledge of the areas of study, and, last but not least, it increases their English language competence in professional settings. The activities aimed at specialized text comprehension that are practised in group work can be various. For example, the following specialized text is on economics, namely, unemployment and its types.

The economy's natural rate of unemployment refers to the amount of unemployment that the economy normally experiences. Cyclical unemployment refers to the year-to-year fluctuations in unemployment, and it is associated with the short-run ups and downs of economic activity. In most markets in the economy, prices adjust to bring quantity supplied and quantity demanded into balance. In an ideal labor market, wages would adjust to balance the quantity of labor supplied and the quantity of labor demanded. This adjustment of wages would ensure that all workers are always fully employed. Of course, reality does not resemble this ideal. There are always some workers without jobs, even when the overall economy is doing well.

There are four ways to explain unemployment in the long run. The first explanation is that it takes time for workers to search for the jobs that are best suited for them. The unemployment that results from the process of matching workers and jobs is sometimes called frictional unemployment, and it explains relatively short spells of unemployment.

The next three explanations for unemployment suggest that the number of jobs available in some labor markets may be insufficient to give a job to everyone who wants one. This occurs when the quantity of labor supplied

exceeds the quantity demanded. Unemployment of this sort is called structural, and it explains longer spells of unemployment (Chalabyan et al., 2016: 162-163).

The teacher can set up groups of 4 or 5, the students may be presented with the above-mentioned text and be assigned the following tasks:

1) Entitle the present text. Possible answers can be: *Unemployment, Types of Unemployment*, etc.

2) Pose questions to the text. The teacher can get the students in groups to prepare 5 questions about the text which another group will have to answer from memory. Questions should be factual. For example: *1. What is unemployment? 2. What types of unemployment are mentioned in the text? 3. How can you explain cyclical unemployment? etc.*

3) Reduce the text to exactly 100 words or reduce the total number of sentences by 50%. This task will help the students to identify the most important information in the text and try to convey it in as few words as possible.

4) Insert the following sentences that are in jumbled order into the text.

5) Make up sentences with 10 unknown words from the text. This will help them memorize new words and professional terms and, thus, the students will be able to enrich their vocabulary.

Obviously, the teacher can apply some of the above-mentioned activities separately or a combination of all tasks can contribute to effective and enjoyable group work.

As it can be seen, there are many group work activities that can be practised to improve specialized text comprehension which, in its turn, motivates students and may result in improvement of communicative skills, increasing both vocabulary and knowledge about their own field of study and also encourage them to use English in professional settings.

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