

GROUP WORK IN LARGE CLASSES IN RURAL AREAS

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1. INTRODUCTION :

Most of the schools and colleges in rural areas have large teacher-fronted classrooms. The teaching/ learning process is mainly teacher centered, i.e. for more than 80% of the lesson time, the teacher talks. The concept of group work is not new but rarely practiced in such situation. This paper is an attempt to share the outcome of a group work experiment carried out in the above mentioned context. Recently there has been a significant downfall in classroom learning and language classrooms in rural areas are not an exception. In my college most of the students are from nearby villages and how to attract the students to the classroom is always a debatable question in staff meetings. Teachers blame students for their lack of interest and casual attitude towards education. Whereas students blame the education system, teacher, and sometime they have a 'chalta hain' (it happens !) attitude. I interacted with the students on this issue. In their oral feedback they said :

"We think classes are boring."

"The syllabus is not useful except for examination."

"We don't understand classroom teaching."

"Some of the teachers are good but some make us sleepy."

"It doesn't matter even if we go through readymade notes."

"We attend classes for attendance sake."

Such comments show that the students are not getting the tools which can create interest among them. To make language learning more interesting and to create more space for the students in the teacher centered classroom, I planned some group activities for entry level students (B.A.-1) all the necessary instructions were given. They were divided into small groups. They had to discuss the given topic and come up with their collective opinions and for all communications they had to use English only. The activity went on for half an hour but nothing turned up. It was a very disappointing experience for me. Later on ,during discussion, I found out that these students are from different villages. They knew about group activities but they had never done them before. As it was the beginning of the semester, they were not even well acquainted with each other. They were not willing to participate in any activity. Amid this disappointment and failure, I saw an opportunity to explore the causes of failure and possibilities of group work in the context of rural students in large classrooms.

2. WHY GROUP WORK ?

I wanted to enhance students' active participation in the language classroom. I thought group work would be a better starting point for it as in group one feels secure and supported. I found that it was something different from regular classes; it was giving floor to the students. Besides being a "social animal", man wants to be in groups. Everyone is always a part of some group or other . The students who remain out of the classroom are also part of their personal groups. But in the classroom, though they are the part of big group, i.e. the classroom, they felt like only individuals . Dividing them into small groups could make them more comfortable.

3. PLAN

The plan was discussed with the students. Some groups were formed by self selection and for the remaining members, I took the initiative. The group size was restricted to six. While doing the activities, they turned their benches face to face (a slight modification in classroom arrangement). It

was the group's responsibility that every member should understand what they are doing and every member must contribute to the group work. The decisions should be collective. Some of the group activities undertaken were as follows:

- ✓ Share a memorable experience
- ✓ What would you do in a given situation
- ✓ Role play an assigned situation
- ✓ Understanding a stanza/ paragraph by discussion
- ✓ Prepare a poster
- ✓ Discuss a given concept

4. REACTION

Some students were enthusiastic about the activity but others wanted to escape from situation. Their body language showed resistance, but I forced them to participate, saying it would help them. Some of the objections were:

STUDENTS

"This is worse than regular language classes."

"We don't know English and this will 'expose' us."

"The teacher is 'time passing' (passing time)."

COLLEAGUES

"It's waste of time."

"It would create disturbance for other classes."

"Instead , you should teach them grammar."

5. OBSERVATIONS

In the first few group activities, the student were hesitant to participate. They had problems with sentence construction, pronunciation, etc., so they didn't want to get "exposed". But, slowly, they started participating with confidence. Sometimes when a group didn't get the idea, they needed examples and clues. For success the group needed a leading member, who came forward naturally. Every group should have at least two active members to stir the group to make it active.

6. OUTCOME

- I believe that students can learn and understand better by working in groups.
- The students who were good enough but not Interested In attending classes started participating in language activities.
- Though some of the groups failed, some worked wonderfully.
- In their attempt to present, they learn and understand in better ways. Whatever they presented, they understood better than from classroom teaching.
- Some of the students came in front of the class for the first time, whereas some (very few 10-15%) students refused to come forward.
- Some were silent learners; they were more comfortable to observe other's Performance.
- Group dynamics worked magically - the student became confident, motivated and more alert.

7. IMPLICATIONS

To be successful a group needs a leading member, who comes forward naturally. Every group should have at least two active members to stir the group to make it active. It allows the students to mix with everyone in the group. It gives the sense of achievement to all members. It develops students' interpersonal skills and soft skills. It gives a chance to the teacher to monitor and personally contact every group. It gives an opportunity to listen to the students' use of language. After every session feedback is essential. At the end the teacher should properly convey the purpose behind the activity and how it is achieved (or what they have achieved); otherwise, students may get confused and have misunderstanding.

8. CONCLUSION

Through this experiment what I have learned is- if the students get liberty, they can come up with creative ideas. Working in groups made the students realize the power of collective thinking. The experiment increased their participation in the language classroom and made them more confident and motivated.

9. REFERENCES

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