It Takes Two to Tango: Academic Environment and Social Skills

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Abstract

It is known that social skills is the main contributing factor to building more positive relationships among group members and group work undoubtedly instils this quality. By exploring the educational pedagogies and classroom discourses, it is the aim of the study to extend theoretical insights into the way ESL speaking classrooms might help to develop social and learning identities of the learners in the classrooms. This study, therefore, has focused on student–student interaction in an ESL tertiary speaking classroom in an institution of higher learning. The results revealed that the students who worked in small groups improved their academic achievement, speaking skills as well as their social skills. They became more positive towards class work, assumed responsibilities and performed their best regardless of their tasks. In the interviews the learners admitted that they became more skilled at expressing their opinions and supporting their arguments with valid reasons. Group work also involved trusting group members to editing and correcting their work, accepting peer feedback and resolving conflicts constructively if they are to capitalise on the opportunities presented at the academic setting. It was learnt that group discussions in ESL classrooms offered experiential learning whereby learners became more skilled at using suitable choice of words to maintain their good rapport among the group members and also showed higher academic performance. This indicates that good social skills facilitate academic advancement.

Keywords: social skills, academic advancement, resolving conflicts

1. Introduction

Group work (GW) provides students with opportunities to practise the target language naturally than in a traditional teacher-fronted form of instruction. Hirst and Slavik (2005) and Lim (2002) stress that the most powerful language curricula are those which maximise opportunities for multiple channelling in language learning and GW is one exemplary avenue for creating opportunities for students. Employing GW in a speaking class, for instance, is claimed to increase not only the quantity but also the quality of students' talk in the target language naturally (Mason, 2006; Iwai, 2004; Panetta, Dornbush & Loomis, 2001). GW allows students to engage in genuine communication. Mason (2006) and Chen (2004) view classroom interactions as a powerful tool to uplift learners' academic success while Panetta, Dornbush and Loomis (2002) and Azizah Kadir (2002) claim that small group interactions positively relate to social skills and academic achievement.

Ingleton (2000) perceives GW to facilitate the acquisition of social skills and strenghtens students' interpersoal skills. It affords reticent freshmen the opportunity to make new friends thereby helping them adapt more easily to university education. The process of working in groups can teach students important skills which are important in life such as interpersonal communication, leadership, conflict resolution and so forth. Interaction in GW allows students to practice skills through commicating, discussing, observing, performing and receiving feedback on social behaviors. Johnson and Johnson's (1999) postulate that when learners cooperate with one another in a small group, it creates a stress-free environment to learn which also encourages academic success (Iwai, 2004; Hirst & Slavik, 2005).

Researchers (Arumugam, 2011; Smith & Spindle, 2007; Mason, 2006; Iwai, 2004; Panetta, Dornbush & Loomis, 2002) claim that GW not only enhances academic advancement but also fosters social skills among students of all ages when they learn to share ideas with their group members and care for them. They also believe that GW

heightens confidence, self-esteem especially to limited English proficient students as they can find positive social benefits in the spirit of cooperation within the classroom. Smith and Spindle (2007) and Mason (2006) opine that social skills are the main contributing factors to building more positive relationships among group members and this undoubtedly boosts academic advancement too.

Although there is a concerted effort to inculcate the GW within the ESL classrooms very little seems to have been done to show the relationship between academic achievement and interpersonal skills while being engaged in GW within an institution of higher learning. This gap leads to the conclusion that there is an urgent need to investigate how GW enhances social skills and academic advancement within the higher education setting. While empirical evidence supports the use of GW (Brown, 2008; Sweeney, Weaven & Herington, 2008, Clenton, 2005; Mariam, 2004), very little is known regarding the extent this approach is helpful to be beneficial in an ESL speaking classroom. Therefore, this study will attempt to fulfil this research niche by answering questions: 'Does group work help to enhance students' interpersonal skills?' and 'To what extent does the group work contribute to ESL learners' speaking performance?'

2. Methodology

The study employed a case study approach more of a qualitative approach with some quantitative input. A total of 30 students volunteered to participate in this study. They were from the Hotel and Tourism Management School. All the students were enrolled in a compulsory critical reading course to improve their English language competency and critical reading. The students were grouped into eight different groups. Each group consisted of 3 - 4 members to avoid the occurrence of free riders (Brown, 2008). The intact class was instructed to carry out the speaking assignment in their groups.

In this context, qualitative method includes observations of group-discussions on how students socialise with one another. Structured interviews focused on students' experience engaging in GW and how the discussions helped influenced them in social and academic pursue. The discussions and structured interviews were audio-taped and transcribed by the researchers. The checklist was adapted from Johnson and Johnson (1994) to elicit data from a group of students at a public institution of higher learning in Malaysia. The checklist consisted of elements use of names, tolerance, acknowledgement of humour, patience, respect for peers, and care for peers, praises and motivation. However, the apparent social skills noted were using names, tolerance skill and sense of humour. The checklist was deemed sufficient in eliciting information on students' interaction in completing assigned tasks employing social skills.

Quantitative method on the other hand, includes the comparison of pretest and posttest marks. This comparison is made to highlight the impact of GW and social skills in academic achievement.

The theoretical framework for the study draws from Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory which posits that language learning takes place when people interact socially. Vygotsky argues that social interaction plays a fundamental role in the development of children's cognition. As the learners work together through interacting with one another, it is expected to create a stress-free environment which will lead to meaningful interactions at a naturalistic educational setting which results in better acquisition of social skills among students (Nason & Woodruff, 2004; Iwai, 2004; Vygotsky, 1986).

3. Results and Discussions

3.1 Research Question 1

Does group work help to enhance students' interpersonal skills?

Social Skills

Smith and Spindle (2007), Mason (2006) and Lancaster and Strand (2001) proposed that apart from learning speaking, GW complemented the development of social skills. The social skills employed in this present study are adapted from Johnson and Johnson (1994). Basically, observations were made when they interacted with one another while engaged in group-discussion. The social skills observed were level of tolerance, acknowledgement of humour, patience, respect for peers, care for peers, praises and motivation. However, the apparent social skills noted were using names, tolerance skills and 'acknowledging others' use of humour. It was also observed that these social skills guided and elevated the level of interaction and eased the group work process.

Mariam (2004) perceived that GW creates opportunities for learners to interact more intimately with one another resulting in closer ties among group members. It was noticed that learners were close to one another and called members by their 'pet name'. Fauzi called her group member Raffli as 'Li'. Raffli on the other hand called his group member Affandi as 'Fends', Misyana as 'Mis' and Suriani as 'Ni'. This form of address demonstrates the

closeness of the group members. They addressed their peers using their names to encourage their participation in group discussions and to get their opinions. Affandi said, 'When we first started our group work, we knew our members but we were not close to one another. After, three sessions, we even discussed sensitive issues. Our group members were okay with it.'

Excerpt 1

Suriani	Li, cigarette is very sensitive in our group *lah*. How to talk about negative effects?
Hazwan	No worries, I am okay. We can discuss. I am okay. Let me start, cigarette contains nicotine. Nicotine is bad for **YOU** (stressed on 'you' and laughed)
Rafli	You know the effect of nicotine and you are not worried wan?
Hazwan	It helps me to relax my mind, you know (giggles). Now let us discus our speaking task *lah*

Hazwan said, 'It's fun and I enjoyed because I get to talk to others and I had a good time. I can even talk about my personal problems to my group members.' Suriani said, 'I made new friends. We were not so stressed sharing ideas and learning from our members. We were free and no need to be afraid of our lecturer. We can discuss our task and also can 'chit-chat' with friends.'

It was observed that although the learners were pressed for time as they had to complete their tasks within the allotted time, the learners seemed to be happy and often found them laughing. When members commented on their intake of carbohydrate and teased one of their group members to be 'has consumed too much of carbohydrate, teasing her obesity, she took it easily and just brushed off the comment as a joke and laughed it off. This is an evident that the learners enjoyed GW.

Another member, Hazrul started humming a song from a famous movie. The group members started laughing and commented him to stop singing, 'Azrul, my brain is freezing. Please stop singing.' All cracked laughing. On the whole the environment was very much stress-free. Most of the time, the learners found some kind of avenue to amuse themselves. The stress-free environment was also demonstrated by most members who laughed demonstrating the light-hearted learning setting. This finding reinforces Nason and Woodruff (2004), Mattos (2000) and Kagan's (1995) notion that GW reduces anxiety and creates a risk-free and friendly environment.

Mariam (2004) and Chandrika (2001) claimed that GW elevates the level of tolerance among learners. Classroom observation showed a high level of tolerance among students. When some learners found it difficult to cope with the assigned task, the proficient learners made the effort to patiently explain till they could move on with them. They were very accommodative and tried getting all the members involved in whatever tasks they discussed. Even if some members disagreed to a certain point of view, the members in the group were able to discuss and arrive at a common understanding.

Siti Fairuza admitted that she did not know much about their assigned topic, 'luring Malaysian expertise from abroad', Adila Talip a proficient learner accepted it easily saying '*Tak apa'* (nevermind). She went on explaining the assigned topic to the group members. Adila accepted Sit Fairuza's 'lack of knowledge' on the subject matter as a norm. She lightly brushed off the matter to harmonise the situation by explaining the assignment in their mother tongue so that Siti Fairuza could follow the discussion. She did not magnify the issue. This exemplifies her willingness to accept her peer's weakness. Such incident was also obvious in other groups. The group members often accepted inability of their peers as a part of their GW without frowning or exhibiting any disappointment. This shows an increased level of tolerance among group members.

At times, when some group members disagreed with their peers' views, others were seen interrupting to harmonise the situation. A respondent, Nadiah showed her disagreement to some views presented by her members by justifying her point of view. Noor Khalidah immediately interrupted to harmonise the situation, 'okay, no fighting. Both of you do not worry about who is wrong. Continue with our work.' This is another characteristic found among groups to avoid any dispute among group members.

The learners were very selective in their use of words, avoided any harsh comments and were polite in sharing their ideas. Even when Zashua heard wrong use of tense, he subtly highlighted it, 'I think it is past tense, 'began' because we are discussing what happened yesterday.' When Ridhwan noticed a common mistake of 'got see' instead of 'saw' he pointed out to his group members as shown in the excerpt below:

Excerpt 2

Hazwan	I think it is proper to say 'saw'. I 'got see' is *bahasa pasar* (spoken language).
Hisham	Actually Wan is correct. My teacher has said many times before. So from now it is 'saw' not 'got see', ok?

Hisham and the group members accepted Hazwan's comment positively. Over the length and breadth of the GW, the researchers observed that the learners were respectful to one another in the group and were even more humble when they approached the researchers. Azman, a learner revealed, "All my group members were very polite and did not say any harsh words although some members were not good in English." This finding concurs with that of (Burhanudeen, 2006), and Asmah Omar (1991) who highlighted that the Malay culture emphasises politeness, refined language and character. These characteristics enable students to cultivate good social skills which strengthen their rapport among peers.

Undoubtedly the GW has cultured good social skills among learners. This refined skill has made it possible for the learners to understand one another and work together to complete their class tasks. Researchers felt that the students' good interpersonal skills have brought about a great impact on their academic achievement, especially their speaking skill. The effectiveness of good social skills in heightening learners' academic achievement will be discussed in the next section.

3.2 Research Question 2

To what extent does the group work contribute to ESL learners' speaking performance?

The success of the GW in academic advancement and interpersonal skill were highlighted earlier by Arumugam (2011), Brown (2008); Mason (2006) and Hirst & Slavik, 2005). They claimed that good interpersonal skills heighten academic achievement. Table 1 shows the results of the mean value of speaking test of learners worked in groups.

Table 1. Mean value of speaking marks

Test	Pretest	Test 1	Test 2	Posttest
Mean	10. 1579	11. 3759	13.1149	16. 3772

The pre and post-test speaking performance of the learners was first analysed according to their overall test scores using paired-samples t tests. The scores show statistically significant improvement in scores from pre-test M=10.1579 to Post-test M = 16.3772, p= 0005. Therefore, it can be concluded that there was a significant difference between the pre and post-test score among the learners. The low significance value for the t test p=0.000, indicated that there was a significant difference between the two variables. Thus, it indicated that the learners who were taught employing the Group Work in the speaking class performed well. Therefore, we can conclude that there was a significant improvement in scores in post-test from pre-test. At this juncture, it could be argued that GW has transformed good interpersonal skills and it has enhanced learners' speaking performance.

Structured Interviews

GW provides students with multiple opportunities to overcome their weaknesses in certain specific aspects. For example Nadiah said, "The group work helped to improve my social skills on how to talk to my friends without hurting them. I learn to share my ideas with my group members and also learn to adjust with other group members' style of working. This enabled a smooth discussion with my team members while completing my assigned tasks.'

'When I'm stuck with something, my group member who is smarter than me always helped me,' said Misyana. 'In group, we become close to our group members and become friends', said Afifah. A number of students shared the benefits of working with peers in completing their assignments which facilitate the group to achieve higher marks than expected. One student pointed out: 'It is really fun working in groups. We also do more practice and get in-depth knowledge when we work in a group compared to working individually. GW helped me to 'polish' my communication skills and this facilitated me so much in dealing with my group members during our group discussion.' This concurs with the literature on benefit of academic advancement and social skills through GW (Brown, 2008; Mason, 2006; Hirst & Slavik, 2005).

Sharil shared,

> GW should continue because it encourages team work and exchange of ideas. It gets us talking and we get to understand one another better.It definitely helped me improve my speaking grades.'

Hazwan said, ' It was fun. We chose our friends and helped one another. We were motivated to outperform other

groups. Another learner, Syazwani said, "Group work encouraged me to speak English. Usually I discuss in Bahasa Malaysia (first language) and translate it to English but this time I was forced to speak English. This really encouraged me to improve my speaking skills. Many of our classmates also speak English now.'

Razman, who was noticed to be quiet in the class said,

> 'It is difficult to explain my idea. My English is not good. My friends can talk very well. Sometimes my group members have heated debate and l like to join but it is very difficult for me to express but I always listen to their arguments and learn from them. Now l can also discuss with my friends.'

Afiqah shared her views, 'Group work encouraged me to take responsibility and initiative to help my group members who faced problem in completing assigned tasks.' She added that she was surprised to see that some of the quiet students, who hardly showed any interest in group discussion, were willing to describe their ideas to their peers.

The results obtained revealed that students acknowledge the academic, social and generic benefits of GW. Aiman during the interview said,

> 'Working in small groups is a good way to learn, quite exciting and interesting than lecture method. Group work helped my class presentation skills. It also helps to have good interpersonal skills.'

A clear benefit of GW that emerged in this study is that of how useful GW was for the students to improve their social skills which encouraged their academic performance. These findings are consistent with those of Romova and Andrew (2011) and Arumugam (2011).

4. Conclusion

In general, the results suggest that academic achievement is significantly associated with social skills as students are engaged in GW. Students who exhibited improvement in their interpersonal skills and made more friends, showed great academic advancement in their speaking grades. Moreover, it is important to note students in fact revealed that they liked working in groups and also learnt to accommodate the differences between their group members.

However, GW is not a problem free method. A proficient learner felt that sometimes working in a group makes people lazy because they feel the rest of the group will work as they are given group grades. He said that the instructor should go the extra mile to see that every student is actively involved. This may require the instructor to counsel 'problematic' students individually to ensure equal participation.

Although, there is no 'the perfect methodology', GW is one instructional method that significantly facilitates the acquisition of academic and social skills. Hence it could be concluded that GW-based activities enhance social skills and bring about a stress-free environment which promotes academic achievement as well (Kreire, et al., (2007). In sum, GW allowed learners to learn and acquire academic and social skill simultaneously. The stress-free GW setting encouraged students to enjoy the benefits from both academic and social skills. It is, therefore, clear that interpersonal skills and academic achievement go hand-in-hand.

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