

**AN APPROACH TO ORGANIZING GROUP DISCUSSIONS IN EFL
LEARNING / UNE APPROCHE POUR ORGANISER DES
DISCUSSIONS DE GROUPE DANS L'APPRENTISSAGE DE
L'ANGLAIS LANGUE ETRANGERE¹
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Abstract: *The paper aims to present group discussions as an efficient means for raising the students' motivation level and increasing their involvement in the language learning process. Problem-solving discussion is a task-based activity viewed as a structural language endeavor, which leads to a range of outcomes for those undertaking the task. An organizational framework plays the key role for determining successful discussions. There are procedural steps of the group discussion sessions: the chairperson is chosen; the teacher selects the discussion topics; after formulating solutions, the chairperson directs the students to give an oral summary of the discussion proceedings; the teacher acts as a language consultant. Taking into consideration the students' individual needs, we may use some techniques in order to deal with the uncooperative students.*

Key-words: *effective discussions, problem-solving, communicative activities, procedural steps, techniques, teacher's participation*

If we want our students to become effective communicators in the target language, we must provide them various opportunities to develop the types of interactive skills that most closely approximate communication in the real world. The most natural way to develop these skills can be realized through language-learning activities that promote conversation and discussion skills. The former can be accomplished through student – student interviews, as well as information – gap activities, while the latter through group discussions or debates. As concerns language – learning activities, ‘group discussion’ reflects most appropriately authentic communication, as being an expression of a person’s feelings, needs, experiences in such situations that are never the same.

Communicative activities keep students’ interaction to maximum by exchanging information and giving opinions through co-operative work. By practising group discussions, students can develop speaking skills, acquire fluency and develop positive effects towards friendship.

1. The Importance of Effective Discussions

To initiate and sustain effective discussions is not very easy, in spite of our students’ eager insistence that they should be provided with more opportunities to talk. The discussion session can be difficult because of some reasons: a lack of sound preliminary planning, lack of an effectively structured task-based framework to channelize the discussions, and lack of stimulating discussion topics. To design and implement a group-discussion component based on a problem-solving approach should prompt more interaction than debating tasks.

Problem-solving is a real time activity that appeals to active memories and clearly requires not just remembering, but operating on those active memories. Solving a problem – which utilizes both short-term and long-term memory – involves a process of discovering what must be done to achieve a goal. Problem-solving discussion is a task-based activity viewed as a structural language endeavor, which has a particular objective, an appropriate content, a specific working procedure, and a range of outcomes for those undertaking the task.

Language is a message-focused activity, a system which allows us to convey messages. Message-focus is quite central to communicative methodology, because it is very important to language use, and communicative methodologists aim to stimulate processes of language use in the classroom. Fluency in the communicative processes can be developed within a task-oriented teaching. This kind of teaching provides ‘actual meaning’ by centering on the tasks to be mediated through language, and where the

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success or failure is seen to be judged in terms of whether or not these tasks are performed.

The negotiating of meaning that occurs in this interactive process is the key element in the second-language development, as the learners, trying to modify or adapt the language input, are able to manage their own learning, through individualized and personalized language instruction.

The students in their classroom must become like in the world outside, where they can use language spontaneously, in a communicative manner. Discussion may take place at any time. Group work is an instruction method where learners form small groups and work together toward their objective. The communication process is produced and facilitated through good discussion. Every student, even if passive or shy, takes part in communicative activities. In student-centered classes, students know what they want to learn, so teachers should help them meet their goals. Because of the increasing responsibility of taking part in a discussion, students feel comfortable and confident in themselves, using that type of language that they intend to learn.

2. An Organizational Framework

There are some important factors that determine successful discussions, among which organizational planning plays the key role. This involves insuring face-to-face communication, scheduling a regular weekly session for this activity, and providing a step-by-step problem-solving model and a list of negotiating strategies for the students to use. A successful group discussion also needs a clear understanding of the aims and specific objectives of the activity, as well as orienting the students to the non-traditional roles to be played by both teacher and students for this activity to be successful.

In order to use the techniques involved in group-learning activities properly the relationship between teacher and student may have to be changed or improved. The activities cannot work unless there is a relaxed and friendly atmosphere. The teacher will also need to improve or change the students' ideas, and possibly his / her, of what the teacher is there for.

Because of the increasing responsibility of participating in a discussion, students feel comfortable and confident in themselves, using that type of language that they intend to learn. Foreign language syllabus is conceptualized to enable students using different materials adapted to the language level of the students. Students learn to relate language functions to different relevant topics. Through a foreign language students explore language, cultural education and learn to think critically. Social relationships in a foreign language culture will be studied and understood through a student's experience as a person, through familiar and school life, through preparing professional and academic carrier, through social structures in society.

Communicative activities mean interaction and communication. Communication in itself includes discussion. If we think in terms of a 'good discussion' we suppose it to be an active learning where the participants exchange ideas. Discussion may happen at any level around different topics. At university level, discussion may happen in a lecture when the lecturer brainstorms a topic and involves students in discussion. We may apply discussion involving our students to speak around topics concerning the syllabus as an effective technique or using an effective method. In such a way they try to give their opinion. The aim is not only making them talk, but discussing, encouraging speaking, because active interaction makes them active communicators.

In discussions, learners should progress from turn taking and articulating ideas, thoughts and feelings to responding and making use of higher order skills such as questioning, challenging, summarizing and building on the contributions of others.

3. Procedural Steps

The procedures of the discussion sessions may run as follows:

- The group chairperson (the teacher may choose a different one for each session) persuades several students to comment on the previous session, on the discussion topic nature and the solutions formulated as well as their efficacy in solving the group task, and

on a review of the negotiating strategies used. We may have the students focus on two or three notional-functions in a session to avoid overload: requesting clarification, asking for and giving an opinion, agreeing / disagreeing tactfully, interrupting politely, making suggestions, etc.

- For the next step, we are to select the discussion topics which have to be fit for the needs, desires, and interests of the students. In fact, the most suitable problems for discussion groups are those which include an attitudinal component and multiple solutions. To find effective discussion topics is quite easy if each of the students is asked to come up with a few problems they would like to talk about. These are prioritized by the whole group, and the most popular ones are to be discussed first. The topic that has been chosen is then analysed according to a problem-solving model, which the teacher formally presents to the students.

- After having formulated solutions via a timed brainstorming session, the chairperson directs a number of students to give an oral summary of the proceedings of the current discussion session. What is the teacher's role in this activity? As the chairperson's main task is to orchestrate the session, taking care that all members of the group have an opportunity to take part in the discussion, the teacher's role is to act as language consultant. He /She has to resolve communicative blocks, to provide commentary on any incongruency in the arguments, and to make a note of the more flashy errors, which can be pointed out and drilled at a more appropriate time between the sessions. A videotaped feedback session provides an opportunity to scrutinize linguistic and communicative competencies.

Here is a model of a worksheet with six steps we find it useful in problem solving:

1. Realization of a felt need
2. Locating and defining the problem
 - a. Problem can be located according to: fact and value;
 - b. The definition of the problem must be agreed upon.
3. Exploring the problem
 - a. Getting all the necessary facts
 - b. Researching them
 - c. We must consider the problem's: causes, effects, and extent.
4. Proposing possible solutions
 - a. Types of solutions (past, present, new)
 - b. Someone or group needs to keep track of the solutions
5. Choosing a solution
 - a. Up to now based on facts; now attitudes and opinions are involved
 - b. Four criteria for solutions (Is it workable? Is it practical? Will it solve the problem? Are there any disadvantages?)
6. Testing the solution
 - a. Debating it
 - b. Finding up new problems

In the case of an average-size class of about 20, the students can be simply divided into three groups, each with its own chairperson, and with the teacher observing all the three. We think it necessary that the discussion topics for all three groups should be of a uniform nature, so that the individual groups, when re-forming for a whole class activity, can debate and evaluate, through the group spokesman, the solutions of each of the groups, in order to arrive at a whole class consensus. The teacher should initiate the discussion allowing the students time to think and speak. The teacher has to brainstorm the topic of discussion, set goals and prepare students just like for other activities. While guiding a discussion, the roles of the teacher can be: giving the students enough information, defining the problem to be discussed, making questions, relating comments to the topic, keeping discussion moving.

Students should be active participants in discussion and good listeners. They should know how to relate what they know to the point and try to speak freely without emotions. Students benefit from a discussion many things apart from acquiring language structures and communication. Discussion makes student confident in understanding the content, increases motivation and enhance students' participation, develops problem solving,

makes students practise concepts, knowledge and information, makes students develop positive feeling towards teaching.

4. Dealing with Uncooperative Students in Group Activities

One of the most challenging experiences has always been – dealing with uncooperative students (passive learners / non-participants). We, as teachers, can not force them to do things out of fear of injuring their self respect, nor can we order them to stop their misbehaviour. Taking into consideration the students' individual needs we may use some techniques in order to deal with these uncooperative students:

- **A careful preparation.** Before preparing our lessons, we need to find out why these students are so inactive, or shy. We should also ask ourselves whether the group activity is too difficult, too simple, or perhaps not interesting. There are some group activities that can be used with success: interviews between students, solving problems, and ordering things.

- **Ask the uncooperative students to do something that does not require speaking.** The teacher may put the passive students in different groups, and require them to do things without speaking: ask them to hold up a picture for others to discuss, or take notes on the group discussions, or to write down answers given by the group.

- **The point system.** The whole term should consist of 100 points. Students will lose points if they do not work in or after class. So the teacher forces students indirectly to take part in group activities. This is a kind of positive reinforcement that many teachers have been using with great success.

- **The teacher's participation in activities with the uncooperative students.** When we divide the students into pairs, we may deliberately leave that student out telling him/her: "I'll work with you". In this way, the student will not feel he/she has been singled out. A silent student can not remain silent in this situation. We should work with the same student at most once a week, otherwise he /she may begin to feel confined.

- **Give each student in the group a different job.** For instance, one student is appointed chairman and guides the discussion. Another acts as a secretary and records everyone's opinion. A third encourages each member to offer an opinion. Finally, a competition is held between groups, with a reward given to the best group.

- **Leave them alone.** We should put the uncooperative students in groups with other students, and pretend we are unaware of their passive behaviour. As time passes, the non-participants may feel left out. They may become worried that they are not learning and gradually try to take part in the activities.

Conclusions

Teaching English is a complex process involving some activities from preparation to evaluation. In addition, there are some barriers regarding teaching speaking, i.e. the number of students, teacher's competence and even students' problems. Although teaching speaking is a kind of a difficult job, still there is a way to overcome some stated problems: group discussion. When offered a range of group discussion experiences, learners are given the opportunity to increase their vocabulary and to widen their range of language. Well- structured group discussion experiences can also lead to improvement in overall attainment in reading and writing. Such discussions promote the corporate skill of cohesion as well as analytical skills, and provide the students the chance to express their needs, interests, feelings and opinions in a non-threatening learning environment via the realistic and functional use of the target language.

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