

Analysing the effectiveness of group work in the ESL classroom

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The purpose of this study was to investigate the effectiveness of using Cooperative Learning, (CL) which is also known as Group work, in the English as a Second Language (ESL) Classroom. The survey was conducted at the Faculty of Arts, University of Peradeniya and the data was gathered through a randomly selected sample of 25 undergraduates of the first year belonging to the Basic Level. The selected group had scored marks ranging from 0-39 at the English Placement Test conducted by the Faculty of Arts. A majority of the undergraduates who follow the Basic Level pay less attention to ESL as most of the courses in their curriculum are offered in either Sinhala or Tamil. So, they show less interest in most of the activities done in the ESL classroom. Moreover, their inhibition towards English language learning as well as the lack of self-confidence can be identified as major obstacles in their learning process. Therefore, a group speech activity was chosen as a remedial method to assess the effectiveness of co-operative learning. To carry out this study, the randomly chosen undergraduates (25) were instructed to do a speech activity. The target group of students were divided equally into 05 groups and they were asked to do a group presentation on a topic related to a current issue. The data gathered from the students were then analysed and the findings were discussed. Through this study, the following main hypotheses can be drawn forward. (a) CL technique enables the learners to feel more comfortable in using the Second Language (L2) spontaneously. (b) CL technique has a positive impact on the level of motivation which ultimately leads to a higher level of proficiency in the Target Language (TL). Data collection involved both qualitative and quantitative methods. Both, students and instructors were given questionnaires to mark their preferences. Both questionnaires were then analysed and compared. The students' questionnaire demonstrated that they have a positive attitude towards CL or group work. The results of the instructors' questionnaire revealed that CL can play a vital role in language learning and teaching. Through the responses stated at the interviews both the students and instructors revealed that the CL technique creates a positive atmosphere and a less threatening classroom. Moreover, through the findings of this research it was posited that CL technique develops self-confidence of the students, reduces classroom anxiety and inhibition and most importantly that it allows students to learn from each other.

Keywords: Cooperative Learning, English as a Second Language, Second Language, Target Language