

Article Title

Small Group Interaction Among Native English Speaking and Non-Native English Speaking Learners in a Teacher Training Context

Author

Linda Martine

Bio Data

Linda Martine is a Lecturer in the Department of English
Himeji Dokkyo University

Abstract

This paper focuses on the problems faced by international students studying abroad at English speaking universities. In particular it looks at the difficulties Asian students have in small group work activities and offers some recommendations on how these can be overcome.

Introduction

The use of small group work (SWG) in the SLA classroom is a familiar technique to TEFL/TESL teachers. The pedagogical benefits range from 'improving the quality of student talk', and 'helping to individualise instruction', to 'promoting a positive affective climate', and 'motivating learners' (Long and Porter 1985: pgs.4, 11, 208, 211, 212). Brown (1994: pgs.35,173) supports Long and Porter's findings in saying that small groups give students opportunities for the practice of negotiation of meaning, conversational exchanges and 'face to face give and take' that would not be possible in other types of activities.

Many of these same benefits apply to the teacher training context. One important benefit seems to be the chance for teacher/learners using SGW to share opinions and knowledge (Roberts 1998: p.239). Bailey (1996: p.262) supports the idea of learners combining to share ideas. In fact he states that at the University of Massachusetts 'A crucial component of this course design was a creation of a class community in which peers could learn both with and from one another'. This leads to one of the main reasons for researching the

question ‘In a teacher training context where students work in mixed groups of native English speakers (NS) and non-native English speakers (NNS), do the NS students dominate the group interaction?’ If this is the case, then the opportunities to benefit from the class community may be severely limited, if only the NS students are providing the majority of the input to SWG.

The Research Design

The project came about as a result of discussions among NS and NNS classmates that indicated both groups felt the NS learners were exerting more control over the interaction than the NNS learners. As a result the following questions emerged:

- 1) In a teacher training context where NS and NNS students work together in small groups, do the NS learners dominate?
- 2) If they do, what elements inhibit or promote NNS students’ participation?
- 3) Can participants provide solutions to the issues raised in questions 1 and 2?

This research was carried out by using a small scale study of small group work activities conducted in a teacher training context. Two in-class SWG activities and one homework SGW activity with eighteen students related to two MA courses at the University of Birmingham were audiotape recorded, transcribed and analyzed to determine if NS students dominated the activities. Then the project participants met for group discussions to investigate the elements that inhibit or promote participation in SGW tasks. The participants were also asked to make recommendations on how these types of activities could be structured to better meet the students’ learning needs.

The research pertaining to questions 1, 2 and 3 consisted of fourteen NNS students and four NS students. Of the eighteen students, thirteen took part in the actual classroom and homework SWG activities that comprised the data used in this study. Later in the project separate group discussions were held to investigate students’ impressions about contributing to SGW activities and what factors dictated their level of participation. Group discussions were chosen because they provided a livelier forum and produced deeper responses regarding group work interaction. Five additional interested NNS parties joined the others to take part in the separate group discussions on participation. The participants totaled eighteen members, fourteen of whom were NNS students and four of whom were NS students.

No questions pertaining to the research area of native speaker domination were asked, in order not to bias participants’ responses. In the interests of replicating, as near as possible, the same conditions for each discussion, the same set of questions were used in all sessions. It was thought that the NNS students might feel inhibited talking about this topic with a NS classmate present. Therefore a Japanese classmate introduced the questions and took part in the subsequent discussions. In the NS group discussions I introduced the questions. The four questions used to present the topic of group work interaction were:

- 1) At the Centre for English Language Studies (CELS), how did you feel about working in groups that were a combination of non-native English speaking teacher/learners and native English speaking teacher/learners?
- 2) At CELS did you ever feel uncomfortable working in groups that were a combination of non-native English speaking teacher/learners and native English speaking teacher/learners?
- 3) If so, can you give more details about the situation or these situations?
- 4) What suggestions could you make to remedy these types of situations?

Data Analysis

In the original study three factors that seem to indicate domination (McCarthy 1991, Zuengler 1989) were isolated and used to examine the data.

- 1) Total number of words produced by each participant in each activity.
- 2) Average number of words per turn produced by each participant in each activity.
- 3) Total number of turns taken by each participant in each activity.

In addition, the data was recently re-analysed to include the lengths of time each participant contributed to the SWG task. Although none of the participants spoke for any extended length of time it is still clear that this factor also shows dominance by the NS teacher/learners.

The length of this paper prohibits a detailed examination of all these factors. However the total number of turns and the length of time each participant contributed are shown in the figure included as Appendix 1. In the first activity (Tape A) analysed for this graph, the teacher (T) and a class observer (O) made contributions to the SWG. The second activity is identified as Tape B and the third is identified as Tape C. In all the SWG activities the NS participants are designated as X1, X2 respectively, the NNS participants are designated as Y1, Y2 respectively. The total number of turns for each participant is compared to the amount of time each participant spent speaking in each activity. Appendix 1 clearly indicates that a high level of dominance was demonstrated by the native English speaking participants, regarding both the time they spent speaking and the total number of turns they took in each activity.

Elements affecting participation

The consequent discussions were also audio taped and transcribed. The issues frequently referred to in all the conversations were then isolated. Some of the important topics raised were the following: (a) positive attitudes towards SWG, (b) previous experience with SWG, (c) difficulties with discourse strategies and language proficiency, (d) cultural influences and (e) subject knowledge. All these topics will now be discussed in more detail.

a) Acceptance of SGW

The discussions revealed that there were positive attitudes among the majority of the NNS students towards SWG activities. There is a fair amount of literature promoting group work as a positive aspect of second language acquisition and as a beneficial form of learning (Macaro 1996, Roberts 1998). Luft (1984: p41) also notes that working in a group promotes unity. Rabow, Charness, Kipperman and Radcliffe-Vasile (1994: p2, 3) emphasise the idea of using discussion to encourage learning and the students' enjoyment of learning. It seems that this is not a Western educational idea that is being imposed on international students. Confirming this, a Greek member of this research project pointed out:

*I feel quite happy to join this kind of group work. Yes I (wish) 'cause
People from different cultural background can share different opinions
which make the classroom quite interesting.*

Or as one NNS student from China reveals:

*Actually we don't have so much group work in our teaching situations.
But I think we should because if you have a large group of students
It would be better if they know how to co-operate and go
together and you know each other. And learn is a fun way.*

It is this involvement of the students in their own learning process, Rabow, Charness, Kipperman and Radcliffe-Vasile (1992: p2, 8, 9) say that is crucial to the true acquisition of the material.

b) Previous Experience with SGW

The promotion of group work activities in the formal educational system of other countries seems to be an important issue, as familiarity and past experience with this style of learning were identified by the discussion participants as significant.

Several students indicated that previous experience with working in small groups was a very important factor. Some European students mentioned they had participated quite often in SWG tasks at university and in the public school system in their countries. This is in sharp contrast to the Asian students' previous educational experiences. Several mentions were made by them identifying this lack of exposure to SWG as a problem. Maley (1986: p.104) highlights some of the difficulties that are prevalent in the Chinese educational system. He states a predominant problem is the focus on and the importance of rote memorization. Anderson (1993: pg105. Wadden [ed]) asserts this is also a characteristic of

the Japanese style of communication. Formulated speech making is highly esteemed in Japan and often is used as a way of practicing a foreign language.

The discussion of the NS students revealed that they expected the NNS students to be more comfortable and forthcoming in the small group activities. The fact that some students had little or no experience with this type of learning and that the situation would be intimidating to NNS students, had not occurred to them. It seems that more awareness may be needed by NS students regarding the different educational systems that exist in other countries.

It may be important to point out that the few NNS students who did exert some control in two of the three small group tasks were European. The NNS students who contributed the least were Asian, so although they expressed a desire to participate they were unable or uncomfortable with acting on this desire perhaps because of the issues identified above and those that will be touched on next.

c) Difficulties with some aspects of discourse and language proficiency

Although turn taking is a fairly well known aspect of discourse analysis (McCarthy 1991, Coulthard 1985, Sacks 1974), some NNS students, particularly the Asian students, were unsure about it. A few Asian students expressed unfamiliarity with this discourse strategy and others expressed uncertainty about the practical applications of turn taking (Martine audio tapes, 2001). Thus not knowing when or how to take a turn is seemingly a factor that may inhibit NNS learner participation. Here is an example from one group discussion where one student explains the difficulties she had with taking turns and another student expresses unfamiliarity with this feature. Participants 1 and 2 (shown as P1 and P2) question the term and the assistant (A) clarifies it for them:

- (P1) *Yeah yeah and I don't know when I can stop, how do you say it's maybe take, turn taking? Someone is speaking and I want to speak after that person but I don't know how to start my talking.*
- (A) *How to join.*
- (P1) *Yeah how to join.*
- (P2) *Is it called turn taking?*
- (P1) *I'm not sure, turn taking?*
- (A) *Yeah turn taking.*

Some of the participants in this project expressed serious concerns about their own language proficiency and felt it was an inhibiting factor to SWG. Although it is understandable that NNS teacher/learners would worry about their language proficiency, it

appears that this concern with language proficiency was perhaps detrimental to group contributions. As one NNS student commented:

Language ability is important for overseas students. Sometimes I can not talk all of my ideas because of limited vocabulary or something. Even though we want to join the group, but can not talk all opinions, just some of them. Understand yes but the language is the big problem.

The NNS anxieties about language proficiency had a somewhat antagonistic affect on the NS students. They often felt compelled to talk more than they were comfortable with, because of the lack of NNS input. As one NS student describes it:

There was me and student _____ there and everyone else was not native and they just would not say anything so we felt we had to.

The above observations are in accordance with Liu (1987: p7), who emphasizes what international students need is “not explicit study of English grammar, but training to enhance their active competence”. He advocates making language improvement for international students an ongoing concern throughout a program, not just a single or couple of components of the entire course.

d) Cultural influences

The NS and NNS students made several mentions of the unique cultural values of their respective nationalities as probable influences on their levels of group work contributions. Among those discussed at length were (d.1) Hofstede’s theories on uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede 1984), (d.2) the value of silence in certain cultures (Rowe 1997, p21), (d.3) views on direct disagreement and co-operation (Anderson 1993) and (d.4) the amount of subject knowledge the participants apparently possessed.

d.1 Uncertainty avoidance

Hofstede’s research (1984) on uncertainty avoidance struck a chord with certain participants of this study. They mentioned this issue as a possible element that affected their behaviour in group interaction (Martine audiotapes 2001). Hofstede (1984: p 111) notes that uncertainty avoidance is rooted in a nation’s culture. It is promoted and transferred through the family, the state educational system and the government. A nation’s society will collectively reflect the values that are held in common amongst its’ members. The Asian concept of ‘losing face’, which may be viewed as a type of uncertainty avoidance, is a well-known aspect of their culture. Several international

students cited this as a deterrent in their participation. In the following excerpt an Asian student elaborates on this idea:

Taiwan...we tend to keep silent because always we are afraid we say something wrong. It's like we kind of lose face.

The fear of 'losing face' seems to figure largely in Asian culture and is likely connected to their feelings about language proficiency and confidence (Anderson 1993: p102, Wadden [ed]).

d.2 Cultural perceptions of silence

The way different cultures view silence in a conversation proved also to be a key issue. For NS students, they were unaware of the fact that in some cultures silence is highly valued. While the Asian students were unaware that silence is not highly prized in conversations among native English speakers and often Europeans. Rowe (1997) in her study examining learner strategies used by Japanese students made the following observation:

Students seem to be unaware of the discomfort that long silences caused, while they thought about a question to ask or were translating in their minds. As a Westerner, it was almost painful to watch. When questioned afterwards, the students all thought that it was normal interaction. Japanese have a far greater tolerance of silence than Westerners.

In contrast, one Austrian student, who had quite a high total of words per turn and high number of turns, remarked, there is a distinct intolerance of reticence in his country:

It is importance in Austria, you need to be talkative to make, achieve things. If you shut up, if you don't say your opinion you are lost. And they will basically eat you.

Thus the cultural value placed on silence may have played a very significant part in determining the amount of participation the NNS learners contributed.

d.3 Cultural views on co-operation and disagreement

One aspect of Asian culture that was also frequently referred to was that of politeness and promoting co-operation in discussions. Some students in the Asian discussion group emphasized this difference between Eastern and Western cultures. In particular, the participants mentioned the major role compromise plays in their society. They stressed that insistence upon one's opinion or bluntly saying 'no' are not seen as acceptable in some Asian cultures.

Hofstede (1984:p27) too acknowledged that this is a significant aspect of many cultures.

“In some cultures and sub-cultures, being polite to another person is more important than supplying objectively correct information; in some, respondents will never use ‘no’”. A few students in the Asian discussion emphasized this difference between Eastern and Western cultures. In particular they stressed that compromise is a major component of discussion in their countries:

(P4) Maybe it's because our culture we try to compromise.

We never say the truth something. Yes maybe mean no

And no maybe mean yes.

(A) 'My opinion is true' we never say that.

(P4) Yes means 'I thinking but it's not yes!'

In Asian countries, it appears that to disagree with someone directly is seen as confrontational and aggressive. One Japanese student wondered if this also applied to Western classrooms. Referring to Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) work on metaphor, she commented:

I was so surprised at the expression 'An argument is war'.

in the textbook, I found that expression, that metaphor.

and in Japan argument is not war at all. So may be

among friends when they discuss in the classroom,

they have to make war

However, the NS learners commented that disagreement and conflicting opinions are normal components of discussions in Western classrooms. Therefore, a fear of offending someone in a group if you disagree with them may have played a role in limiting the Asian students' participation in SGW.

d.4 Subject Knowledge

A study done by Zuenlger (1989: p241) examined NS-NNS interaction and found subject knowledge to be a noteworthy factor. Her results revealed that NNS learners' active

participation in conversations could be explained by the amount of subject or discourse knowledge the students had.

We have evidence that a NNS's active conversational involvement can be explained as a function of relative knowledge of the topic or discourse domain. It is important to consider topic knowledge as *relative* since knowledge is interactionally negotiated.

This proved to be a meaningful issue for the NS learners in this study as they felt the NNS learners saw themselves as being less knowledgeable about teaching English than the NS students. Furthermore, the NS learners also recognized that lack of subject knowledge may have limited their own SGW participation. As one NS participant lamented:

[refers to one specific course] they used to say 'compare two languages you can speak', I can only speak English! Or 'two countries you've traveled to' and I've never been abroad either!

Thus an assumption on the part of the NNS teacher/learners that NS teacher/learners had more subject knowledge purely by virtue of being native English speakers is perhaps unfounded.

Next some of the participants' recommendations on how to remedy some of these issues will subsequently be considered.

Recommendations

Many valuable recommendations were put forward by the learners. However, a complete listing is beyond the scope of this paper. In what follows, the most frequently raised issues were compiled. These will touch on; (I) some aspects of the lecturer's role in the classroom, (II) some forms of cultural consciousness raising, and (III) the benefits of pre-teaching NNS learners the principles of successful group work.

I The lecturer's role in the classroom

The role the lecturer or teacher plays in the classroom may have a big impact on the learners. Not all learners may be entirely comfortable with a highly learner-centred classroom. This may explain why some NNS students suggested that lecturers should organize students into groups. One lecturer was specifically mentioned by students who liked this system:

*(Names lecturer) always divides our class into some groups...
O.K we have no experience about teaching and they have
experience. O.K you can talk together.*

However some learners, notably the NS learners, felt this idea was perhaps inappropriate in a British university:

*...how reflective is that of an MA in a British institution? Because...
you are expected to organize your own study groups, you are expected to
get yourself into groups, you're expected to defend your own corner.*

Other NNS students agreed with this opinion, and stressed the onus should be on the learner.

*But if they are in the university level it's up to those.
it's their responsibility to talk and join the group by
themselves, not wait for the teacher. It's up to the
level of study sometimes I think.*

Another point raised by the participants was the notion of giving more time to the learners to prepare for discussions that were part of SGW. NS students wondered if it would be possible to get discussion topics in advance, thus giving students more time to plan their contributions to the classroom activities. The advantages of this prior preparation are illustrated in a study done by Rabow, Charness, Kipperman and Radcliffe-Vasile (1994,p 4). They found that being given more time to prepare to partake in discussions seemed to benefit the students taking part in their study of learning through discussion.

Nevertheless it is up to the lecturer or teacher to decide what suit's his/her unique teaching environment and his/her individual students.

II Cultural consciousness raising

Given the large part that culture can play on group interaction, it is perhaps not surprising that cultural consciousness raising was one of the recommendations. Participants felt more knowledge of and exposure to different cultures could encourage group members to be more understanding of cultural differences. In particular for the NS learners, this could aid their interaction with their NNS classmates and assist them in the SLA classroom abroad where they may work in the future.

It was also suggested that some sort of cultural consciousness raising should be available to the MA students and lecturers. One Chinese student highlighted the need for teachers to have more knowledge of Asian cultures.

I mean, some, very few of the teachers need to understand our culture. Not every, some people understand our cultures very well, some teachers...the others is, no.

On the other hand, one Japanese student observed that adapting to British culture was an important feature of studying abroad.

I think students also should encourage themselves because they come here because they want to study here. So that means they have to accept this culture, this country's culture...So if he can't do it, what's the point of being here?

III Pre-teaching the principles of successful group work to NNS learners

Previously in this paper it was mentioned that participants found that a lack of previous experience with small group work was a significant factor in promoting or inhibiting participation. Therefore one recommendation was the possibility of pre-teaching the tenets of successful group work. Many of the NNS students supported this idea unreservedly. One student commented:

Yeah the principles of efficient group work should be introduced and taught in a way, so that people know what they're supposed to do within groups.

However, it must be noted that this is quite a difficult task to accomplish in a relatively short period of time. In this study the MA program was a one year program and some participants expressed concern that this may not be enough time to provide valuable exposure to SWG.

Conclusion

In this paper we saw that in a teacher- training context, even when the NS learners are in the minority (4 out of 18 participants), they seem to dominate small group activities when interacting with NNS learners. Moreover this happened even though the NNS learners

were highly motivated. This work attempts to identify some of the factors that discourage NNS students from participating in small group work. The factors examined were;

- (a) The participants desire to be involved in small group activities.
- (b) The amount of previous experience they had with small group work.
- (c) Difficulties with some aspects of English discourse and concerns about language proficiency.
- (d) The part cultural influences played in their interaction in groups.

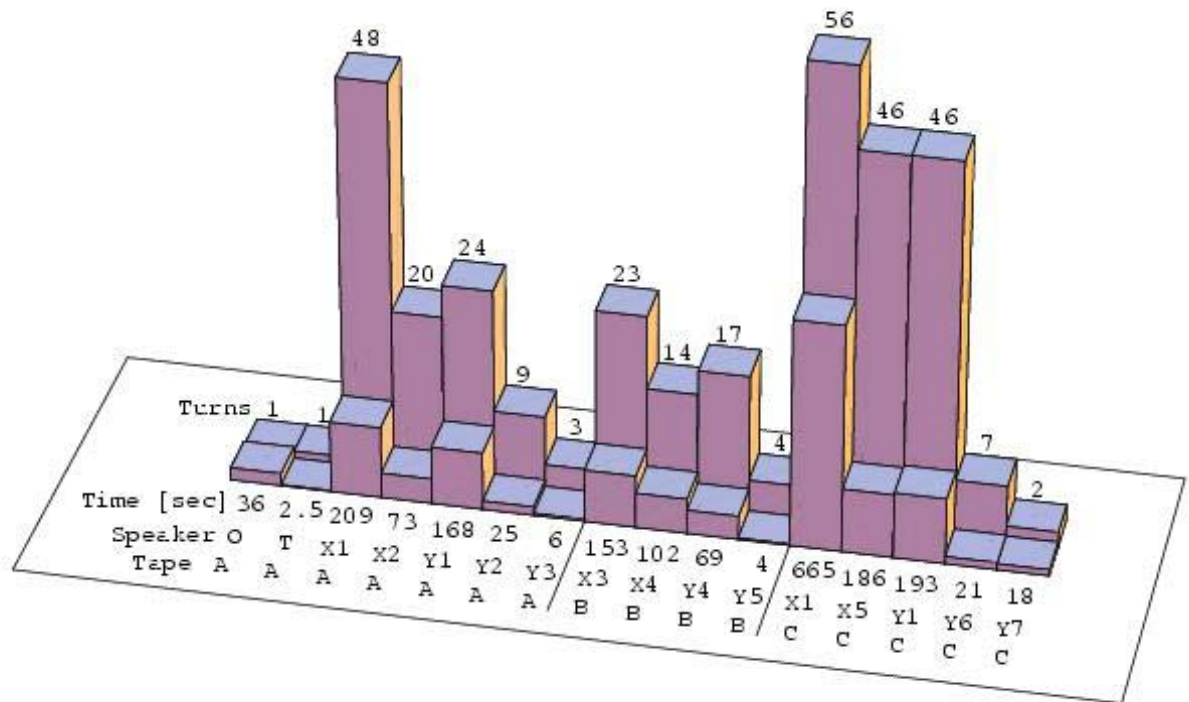
Based upon participants suggestions regarding factors a-d the following strategies for improvement were discussed and put forth as recommendations I-III listed below;

- (I) The role of the lecturer in the teacher training classroom
- (II) The benefits of cultural consciousness raising

- (III) The advantages of pre-teaching the tenets of successful group work to NNS teacher/learners.

On a final note, let's return to the idea of classmates serving as a resource, mentioned in the introduction of this paper. Each of us possess a wealth of experience and knowledge, each of us has something to contribute. It would be regrettable if we did not take full advantage of the opportunities we have to 'learn both with and from each other' (Bailey 1996, p262).

Appendix 1



References

- Anderson, F. 1993. The Enigma of the College Classroom: Nails That Don't Stick Up in Wadden, P (ed) *A Handbook for Teaching English at Japanese Colleges and Universities*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bailey, F. 1996. The role of collaborative dialogue in teacher education in Freeman, D and J. Richards (eds) *Teacher Learning in Language Teacher*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Brown, H. Douglas. 1994. *Teaching by Principles. An Interactive Approach to Language Proficiency*. Upper Saddle River, N.J, USA: Prentice Hall Regents.
- Coulthard, M. 1985. *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis*. Harlow, UK: Addison Wesley Longman Limited.
- Hofstede, G. 1984. *Cultural consequences, international differences in work related values*. Newbury Park, California, USA: SAGE Publications, INC.
- Lakoff, G. and M. Johnson, 1980. *Metaphors we live by*. London: University of Chicago Press.
- Liu, D, 1998. Ethnocentrism in TESOL: Teacher education and the neglected needs of international TESOL students. *ELT Journal*. 52/1:3-9
- Long, M and P. Porter, 1985. Groupwork, Interlanguage Talk and Second Language Acquisition. *TESOL Quarterly* 19/2:207-227.
- Luft, J, 1984. *Group Processes: An Introduction to Group Dynamics*. Palo Alto, California: Mayfield Publishing Company.
- Marcaro, E, 1996. *Target Language, Collaborative Learning and Autonomy*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters Ltd.
- Maley, A, 1986. XANADU - "A miracle of rare device": the teaching of English in China. In Valdes, J (ed) *Culture Bound*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Martine, L, 2001. Small Group Interaction Among Native English Speaking and Non-Native English Speaking Learners in a Teacher Training Context, Audio tapes, MA Dissertation, Centre for English Language Studies, University of Birmingham, UK
- McCarthy, M, 1991. *Discourse Analysis for Language Teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rabow, J, M. Charness, J. Kipperman and S. Radcliffe-Vasile, 1994. In Hill, W.F's *Learning Through Discussion*. Thousand Oaks, California, USA: SAGE Publications, Inc.

Roberts, J, 1998. *Language Teacher Education*. London: Arnold, a member of the Hodder Headline Group.

Sacks, H, 1974. In M. Coulthard's *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis*. Harlow, UK: Addison Wesley Longman Limited. 59-64.

Zuengler, J, 1989. Performance variation in NS-NNS interactions: Ethnolinguistic difference or discourse domain? In S. Gass, C. Madden, D. Preston and L. Selinker (eds) *Variation in second language acquisition*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters. 228-244.