Enhancing Group-work Productivity through Coordinator Roles

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Though usually well intentioned, students do not always work together effectively in project-oriented group work activities. Problems can range from disinterest and confusion to interpersonal conflicts. This article explains the solutions the authors have developed – that of assigning "coordinator" roles – to contend with these problems and further to create more opportunities for learning. The coordinator roles give leadership status to each student and promote accountability with regard to participation and completion of work. The design and implementation of the roles are described first, followed by the authors' research findings on the use of coordinator roles.

やる気のある学習者が必ずしも課題達成型のグループワークを効率的にやるとは限らない。グループワークの問題として、「興味がない」「よくわからない」や、「学習者間の不調和」などがあげられる。本論文はこれらの問題へのある解決策を述べる。その解決策とは、これらの問題に対処するために、そしてさらなる学習の機会をつくるために、「コーディネーター」という役割を与えるというものである。学習者の一人一人がリーダーシップをとることで、グループワークへの参加度と課題達成度が向上する。本論文ではまず、「コーディネーター」のしくみと方法を述べ、次に、実際に「コーディネーター」を使った研究結果について述べる。

Introduction

Having students work together in groups to discuss and solve problems in English has proved to be an important innovation in language teaching methodology. Very few teachers will object to students using English to talk about real issues and communicate their knowledge and ideas to their peers, and teachers who use activities like these likely find the effort to create the classroom materials well worthwhile. At the same time, many teachers will have noticed with dismay that not all students contribute and participate equally in small group projects and discussions. Some seem lost, bored, or otherwise not involved, in contrast to others who participate actively and enthusiastically. The

learning benefits from the activity will therefore not be equally shared, and some students may not learn anything at all.

In a presentation course at their university, the authors found that many student groups were underperforming on semester long presentation projects. For these projects, students worked in groups of five to research an important social issue in Japan, and then to create and deliver a sixty minute PowerPoint presentation on the topic. On their presentation days some groups delivered good presentations: well researched, organized, and rehearsed. Some groups went further, capturing the audience with truly engaging performances. A large number of groups, however, turned in mediocre performances. These presentations, difficult to follow and often tedious, were largely a waste of time for the audience. Hence the learning opportunities that should have been provided for the audience (the presenters' use of language, the content, the demonstration of organization and information synthesis) were almost non-existent. Moreover, the instruments designed to ensure audience participation (note taking, evaluation, and question forms) were compromised by the lacklustre presentations. Thus improving the quality of the presentations in this course became a key challenge for instructors and course designers.

Problems with group work

Two distinct types of group work are commonly utilized in language classrooms. In one, partners or groups are constituted to complete an activity together and then disband. An example is a follow-on group activity that reinforces a linguistic point or a discussion of an article after a careful reading. In project group work, a second type, groups are constituted to work on a project over a sustained period, for example, groups that are assigned to make a video production over the course of a semester. Both approaches are commonly used in language classrooms because they provide students with extended use of the target language and multiple learning opportunities. However, both, and particularly the project oriented group work, are not unproblematic. Do all the students participate and contribute? Does everyone benefit?

A central feature of project group work is a degree of decision making freedom. To use each other as resources and construct meaning in the group work, students need to be able to work through problems together, make their own inferences and develop their own ideas. The freedoms granted to students to collaborate may, however, lead to actions that subvert the goals of the project. Some students may simply not participate, while others may find participation difficult. Johnson and Johnson (1990) describe problems such as unequal workloads that result in unequal learning benefits when some members defer to more able colleagues. Another problem is the experience of the "novice learner" (Leki, 2001), who has difficulty conceptualizing and implementing an effective approach to problem solving. Arbitrary role assignment and unequal power relations can also reduce participation and productivity. In a study of group dynamics on a project team in a university geography course, Leki (2001) observed how two group members were marginalized by dominating individuals. In this student group, neither the objectives of the project nor the learning desires of all participants were achieved. Yet the course instructor, judging from the team's final report, deemed the outcome successful. The dysfunctions of the group process were hidden.

We have observed several similar problems in our presentation course that appear to limit what students can achieve and learn (see

Table 1). These problems involve complex issues, for example, problems in group dynamics and problems with the instructor's knowledge of what students are actually doing in their teams.

Table 1. Problems observed in group work processes

1. Teams may fail to adequately organize and prepare in time.
2. Some students may contribute little to the group effort.
3. Some students may dominate the group and suppress the efforts of others.
4. Even with prior experience doing group work, students may not be able to effectively identify what they need to do and ways to do it.
5. Instructors may have little specific knowledge about what is happening in the teams.

The "Coordinator Roles" approach to structuring group work

Cohen (1994) argues that factors that improve the productivity of group work in terms of specific outcomes, including achievement, conceptual learning and higher order thinking, equal status interaction, and pro-social behaviours can be effectively manipulated and controlled in teaching materials. Indeed, concepts such as "positive interdependence" (Johnson, Johnson, and Holubec, 1994) and "reward interdependence" (Slavin, 1983) are commonly utilized to construct group work activities in language classrooms. We felt that the teaching materials for our presentation course could be improved in order to help students learn more from their group work experience and perform better in presentations. We decided to use "research methods" as the model for the roles, and assign roles that reflect parts of the research process (the reasons for this are discussed below), resulting in the following roles:

- Secondary Research Coordinator
- Primary Research Coordinator

Three more roles were created to include the management of group dynamics, the management of technology, and the management of the group's overall effort, resulting in:

- Group Work Coordinator
- Audio Visual Coordinator
- Strategy Planning Coordinator

With these roles, each individual in the group has an area of responsibility and leadership. The Primary Research Coordinator, for example, is responsible for helping group members decide who to interview, what kinds of interview/survey questions to ask, and how to process the information gathered. Before describing the roles further, however, it may be useful to discuss more of the rationale for the coordinator roles, and provide a brief overview of our teaching context so that readers can better understand how the coordinator roles are used in the course.

At least two competing priorities vie for attention in the design of group work materials at the college level. On one hand, there is the desire to promote collaboration among the students so that they can use each other as learning resources and work to understand and solve problems together. This approach calls for a looser structure, like that proposed by Bruffee (1999), in which

students are granted considerable freedom to make decisions about how to execute the project. On the other hand, there is the desire to promote accountability from the students that calls for a more structured approach. Here, students need to demonstrate progress and achievement in completing the project, through reports and other mechanisms, though still within a framework of collaborative learning (Dornyei 1997, Oxford 1997).

The teaching materials for the coordinator roles draw on both of these principles. Students have a wide latitude of choices, such as their topic choice, how to research, and how to create their presentation. However, they also need to fulfil, and hopefully excel at, meeting a specified set of requirements. These include documented research, coordinator reports, and practice sessions, all maintained in individual portfolios. For the "coordinator report" students explain what they have done to accomplish the tasks set out in their roles, and how their team mates have participated.

A priority in the materials design was to make the roles function as "expert" models. That is to say, the tasks required of each coordinator, though basic and somewhat simplified, are those commonly done by professional researchers. For primary research, for example, the teams needed to interview professionals and visit sites pertaining to their topics. We found that even basic English level students were quite able to do this and to present their findings in English. Thus, while the teaching materials provided to the students reflect the needs of the "novice learner", they also maintain the model of the "expert learner", as described by Bereiter and Scardamalia (1993), as the goal.

Course Context and Materials

In order to clarify questions concerning how the roles were implemented we will briefly describe the presentation course context. However, we believe that this approach can be adapted for a variety of contexts that use project group work.

The course is a year long presentation course in a coordinated English program. Classes are streamed by English proficiency level, though all classes use the same materials. In the first semester, students learn and practice the basics of presenting through a series of short presentations that are self, peer, and instructor evaluated. In the second semester, student teams of five create one major presentation over the semester. They begin by selecting topics and researching, and then create and deliver a PowerPoint supported presentation. Topics are selected by students from current social, economic, and environmental issues in Japan, for example, "Medical Mistakes" or "Juvenile Crime". Emphasis is placed on learning a lot about the topics, creating clear audio-visual supports, practicing extensively, and involving the audience with questions and quizzes during the presentation. Throughout the process of preparing each student maintains a portfolio that is turned in several times during the semester. Evaluation also includes the coordinator report mentioned above, an instructor evaluation of the presentation, and a confidential peer scoring of the team members' efforts.

All the materials for the course, including specialized materials for the coordinators, are accessed by students on the campus intranet. Each coordinator first learns more about his or her responsibilities through these materials and in-class conferences with instructors (see Tables 2 and 3). Then they give assistance, and set up and run meetings on their specialty areas. The Secondary Research

Coordinator, for example, tries to ensure that the team collects, reads, and processes a wide range of information on the topic. She or he documents what has been done in the portfolio in specific worksheets or report forms that are provided. Coordinators are active at different times of the semester. The Audio Visual Coordinator, for example, does not get started until team members are ready to make charts, graphs, and other PowerPoint slides. The Group Work Coordinator, on the other hand, starts early by creating contact lists and dealing with problems that arise in group dynamics (for example, what to do if a member is not participating, or conversely, dominating).

Table 2. Introduction to the Secondary Research Coordinator role

- The Secondary Research Coordinator (SRC) helps the team decide what sub-topics to research, using books, internet or print newspapers, government and NGO sources etc.
- They run meetings in the first few classes in which team members share the results of their secondary research and decide what else needs to be researched.
- The SRC collects summaries of useful articles from team members and distributes them to the whole team.
- They may also need to organise extra secondary research later on, as the team's understanding of the problem develops.
- The SRC writes a Coordinator Report about the results of their work, problems they faced and about their team mates' work.

Table 3. Introduction to the Group Work Coordinator role

- The Group Work Coordinator (GWC) works to make sure the team has successful and productive meetings.
- They make a phone and email address list for their team, and organise meeting times and places.
- If there are problems between team members, the GWC tries to resolve the problem.
- The Group Work Coordinator also organises the Practice Presentation, two weeks before the final presentation.
- Finally, they write a Coordinator Report about their experiences organising group work and the practice presentation, and what they have learned. They also describe their team mates' work in these areas.

Student response to the Coordinator Roles appears strong. The roles seem to help students get started more quickly, and to do better, more sustained work. Some indications of the effectiveness of the roles are discussed next. A full description of this research, as well as course materials, is in Rambo and Matheson (2003).

Student and instructor response

Many students indicated through their coordinator reports, portfolio work, and surveys that they found the coordinator roles helpful. A small sample of comments about successes and problems is shown in Table 4. As these comments show, often

a problem turned out to be a learning opportunity. In addition to student comments, instructors said that having a particular student in a group to talk to about progress in a specific area, as well as portfolios to read at various stages of the project, gave them insights into the group workings and promoted more effective conferencing with the teams.

Table 4. Student comments

On successful experiences:

- *Because I knew what I have to do, I could work well. Each member knew what they have to do in group work. So we could move our group meeting effectively.*
- *We discussed what good power point is like, and my group members told me how to make Power point, for I had never make power point before.*
- *Every member felt that they need to do something because they had role. We didn't rely on one person so that we needed to cooperate with other members.*
- *From the interview notes, we decided what issue fit to the speaker. Again, each of us were enthusiastic that there were battles and the discussion became more like a debate. So I cut them off and call off the meeting to clear up our mind a little.*

On problems:

- *One problem is that there are some members who don't come to class. Another problem is […] we did not do the primary research strategy, so each member go anywhere they want. Our primary research result are not used in the presentation effectively.*
- *When I want group members to do something and that is urgent, even if I really want them to do that soon, some people don't pay attention to me and do what he want to do. It's not easy to do jobs that require relation with others […] It is hard but really important to be responsible to my own job….*
- *At first, (A) didn't join our meetings. It imposed a burden on other member and I didn't satisfied. Our group work coordinator send email and she called him attention to participate in the meeting certainly. Everybody joined after she told him to come…[Also] two specific member often had a quarrel and didn't yield an inch…However, [the group work coordinator] became an intermediary and let them stop a quarrel. Although there were some problems, our team did good job.*

Based on comments like these, as well as repeated experiences watching the exciting, in addition to the frustrating, student presentations, we believe this approach is effective. It seems to help students better understand what to do, how to proceed, and how to deal with problems. Of course, it also raises a number of questions. For example, how much of the discussion the students reported on above was in English? Or, are the productivity levels quantifiably improved by the coordinator roles? These and other questions certainly merit further attention.

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