Demand for communication in english in vietnam

Introduction

1. Reasons for the research

The demand for communication in English has become very urgent in Vietnam since the government's open door policy in late 1980. More and more people, especially working people and students have to learn English to use it at work, in their studies or future jobs. In fact, many adult learners of English who start learning English even from grade one speak English like " bulls in a China shop".

Therefore, the Communicative Approach, using group work activities, has been predominant and widely applied to improve Vietnamese learners' communicative skills of English in Vietnam. Using this learning-centered approach in pedagogy is actually a concern for many English teachers in Vietnam in general and especially for the English teachers at the English Department of my university. Group work has brought innovation in speaking more in terms of theory than in terms of Vietnamese teachers' real classroom practices.

I am twenty two years old and have been teaching English at my university for two years. I am teaching one section of speaking skill per week in a very diverse class of students with different levels of speaking proficiency. Many of my students are sometimes eager to talk in their groups while others just look bored and keep quiet in these groups. Moreover, my students sometimes use Vietnamese a lot in their speaking English class and one member of the group dominates others. According to Harmer (2007), uncooperative and unmotivated students present a serious problem and can easily disrupt the instructional process while productive activities involving

speaking in groups are more demanding and time consuming. Although cooperative learning was originally developed for general education, several researchers have documented its application to second language learning (High, 1993; Holt, 1993; Kessler, 1992; McCafferty, Jacobs & DasilvaIddings, 2006). In terms of speaking English, I wanted to investigate the implementation of group activities to understand their effects on the English oral fluency of my first year English major students at a Vietnamese University.

I would like to explore how my students speak English with their partners and think of activities. I would like to find whether or not interpreting group work activities in different ways of group work develops the first year English major students' oral fluency in my English speaking class. Hopefully, the research findings will be helpful for me to give great perceptions and understandings about implementing group work activities to develop English oral fluency with first year English major students at my university. Therefore, the result will be reflected on my decisions about the organization of effective group work activities in my English speaking classes to develop the quality of teaching.

2. Research questions:
1. How can group work activities be used with first year English major students at a Vietnamese University to develop their English oral fluency?
2. Why do modifying group work activities impact on the English oral fluency of first year English major students at a Vietnamse University?
3. Organization of the research

The research is divided into seven main parts under these headings: Introduction, literature review, context, methods and methodology, analysis and findings, reflections, and conclusion.

- Part one, Introduction includes rationale, the research questions and the overview of the research.

- Part two, Literature review gives and discusses related theoretical background to the research.

- Part three, Context describes the context in which the research has taken place.

- Part four, Methods and methodology includes reasons for the methods chosen, the ethical procedure of my research and the difficulties I faced.

- Part five, Analysis and findings, tells my story of the research.

- Part six, Reflections, includes strong and weak points of my research and my experience about doing research.

- Part seven, Conclusion, finally reviews the outcomes and summarizes the whole research project and provides implication for further research.

Literature review

1. Definition of group work

Johnson, Johnson and Smith (1991, p 15) defines that:

Group work, in language class, is a co-operative activity, during which students share aims and responsibilities to complete a task assigned by the teacher in groups or in pairs.

It can be said that in group work, all the members have chances for greater independence in making their own learning decisions without the teacher controlling any more. They learn to negotiate more equally with their friends and in most cases they feel free to express themselves and use the language. In group work, the focus is not on accuracy but on fluency. In speaking class, group work is often conducted in small groups and lasts for about ten minutes to a class period depending on specific tasks.

The following part discusses the pros and cons of using group work activities in language classes.

2. Benefits and difficulties of using group work activities in language class
Many different kinds of speaking activities such as dialogue, discussion, interview, etc can be performed in groups. In certain types of those activities, group work no doubt offers many advantages.

There have been a number of studies reporting the potential benefits of pair and group work activities in language teaching and learning. According to experts in second language acquisition, negotiation of meaning facilitates both learning and acquisition and is defined as:

The modification and restructuring of interaction that occurs when learners and their interlocutors anticipate, perceive, or experience difficulties in massage comprehensibility. (Pica, 1994, p. 494)

Following is the summary of the most common benefits of using group work in language class.

- Group work promotes learners' responsibility and autonomy.

- Group work increases students' participation, talking time and oral fluency.

According to Harmer (1997), group work provides more opportunities for students' initiation, practice in negotiation of meaning, extended conversational exchanges, face-to-face give and take and adoption of roles. Vygotsky (1978) also believes that learning is not directed one way between teacher and students but in different ways between students and students and between teacher and students. Ur (1996, p232) also shares the same idea:

In group work, learners perform a learning task through small group interaction. It is a form of learner activation that is of particular value in the practice of oral fluency; learners in a class that is divided into five groups get 5 times as many opportunities to talk as in full class organization.

- Working in groups enables students to produce better decisions to solve a specific task.
- Group work promotes individuals' motivation.

Group work enables students to use the language and also motivates them to be more involved and concentrate on the tasks assigned. Richards and Lockhart (1994) believes that through working in groups, students feel relaxed and comfortable to share ideas and play active roles in the learning process without the correcting feedback of teachers. Therefore, they have the benefit of sharing ideas with other group members, learning from other friends' mistakes or success and helping others to learn. Because the comprehension of the subject under discussion is often increased in group

work, students certainly became more motivated. According to Doff (1988), working in pairs or in groups encourages students to be more involved and to concentrate on the tasks. In the non-threatening performance environment of the collaborative classroom, motivation is often improved as students feel less inhibited and more able to explore possibilities for self – expression.

The next part will discuss several difficulties which are often believed to affect the successful implementation of the group work activities in language class.

Organizational difficulties

According to Sheils (1993), in some teaching contexts, the use of group work activities is inappropriate due to the unsuitable physical setting. For instance, my classroom is too big with unmovable desks or there are a large number of students in a class. This also leads to another difficulty relating to the class management. I am afraid of organizing group work because of noise and indiscipline which affect other classes. It is hard for me to provide proper management. If I go and pay attention to one group, the rest of class may forget the task and play about. Students will convert into the mother tongue when they are required to work in groups or they will use class time to chat with each other or become lazier. As such, their speaking skill cannot be improved and their time is wasted.

Learner-related difficulties

The lack of linguistic knowledge to contribute to group work is the typical difficulty faced by many students. Speaking is one of the most complex linguistic skills because it involves thinking of what is to be said and

responding spontaneously to what has been thought. In order to be able to do this, patterns, structures, and words must be chosen to fit the right situation or situation or attitude intended. Byrne (1986) has pointed out that thoughts are controlled to a great extent by vocabulary. We can not talk about something if we have no words for it. The inability to verbalize thought or feeling may distort one's perceptions of objective reality, increase tendency to overact and hinder the likelihood of easy collaboration. Once students do not know enough of the language to express themselves with ease, they often become reluctant to participate in group work.

There are also other situations in which the students' personality (e. g., shy, passive, reserved, etc) or personality conflict(e. g., incompatible personalities) influence students' participation in group work activities. Vygotsky (1986) supposed that relationship of peers has also an influence on interaction in groups. Peers can be proficient learners, learners who are different from teachers (Swain & Lapskin, 1998), more or less proficient learners (Ohta, 1995), more or less informed junior students (McDonald, Kidman, & Clarke, 1991), and peers as native and non-native speakers in the classroom (Barnard, 2002). Sheils (1993) said that though many students are happy to speak in chorus or under the teacher's guidance when doing some kinds of drill, they are inhibited when being asked to express themselves freely in the presence of the whole class. Furthermore, the fear of being corrected in front of the other students may also cause the uneasy collaboration and lead to unproductive groups. In those cases, students may never have been encouraged sufficiently to " have a go" without worrying

about mistakes or they may be accustomed to the traditional teacher-centered class.

Learning style preference certainly affects the students' performance in group work. In her study, Nguyen (2004) illustrates the influences of students' learning style preference on the students' performance in group work activities. She mentions that the learning style preference in Eastern countries like China or Vietnam is greatly influenced by the Confucian culture. The students were often familiar with being transmitted knowledge from the teachers rather than from their peers. Therefore, it might be difficult for the teachers to implement group work activities in language classes due to the students' negative responses to communicative language teaching and learning.

Beside the factors discussed above, there are other situations in which some students, though they do not have problems with the lack of appropriate linguistic competence or personality, have no ideas to contribute or to react to the topic given by the teachers. This may happen when the topic needs too much specialized knowledge to discuss or even when there is nothing interesting to say about it or even when the tasks do not need multiple contributions from all students but can be completed by only one or two individuals.

However, there have been a number of researchers who have reported positive effects of group work activities on the development of speaking ability in the language classroom. They are, therefore, worth considering putting into the classroom more regularly. Also, more investigations should

be conducted to find out the most appropriate techniques or procedures to implement successful group work activities in speaking class, both teachers and students need to play effective roles. The following part discusses the roles the teachers and the students need to perform in order to implement group work successfully.

Concerning the allocation of members into groups, Hurd (2000) says there is no " one right way" to allocate students into groups. Rather, there are members of practices teachers can use. He also states that most selection methods fall into four categories. These are random appointment, self-selection, selective appointment, task appointment.

3. Group work and speaking fluency
Brown (2003) raises a question " Can we really develop our students' fluency?" According to him, in teaching fluency, teachers must be willing to let go of some control in our classroom, let my students have some of the control and let them to do some of the work and set up situations in which fluency can develop, and encourage my students to actually communicate. In fact, I do not need to teach fluency all of the time, but some of the time students need a little guided communication time during which their knowledge of many aspects of the language can develop into fluency. Brown (2003, p. 15) also states

Teachers set up activities and then get out of the way that many students can be talking at the same time […] However, setting up such activities is exactly what the students need to develop.

There is many other research by Ur (1996) and Maurice (1983) noting that the use of group work activities can create many opportunities for students to practice speaking fluency.

Context

Twenty four of my first year English major students in my class who took part in my study were from eighteen to twenty- two with four males and twenty females. I have taught them spoken English for one term with Communicative Method which does not pay much attention to a fixed curriculum but focus instead on authentic materials. My students had one speaking lesson every week and each lesson lasts for 90 minutes. Therefore, I had time to understand about their English competence very well along with their characteristics, and backgrounds. Before entering the University, one third of them finished 7 years of English at high school. The rest studied English for 3 years only. When entering the University, they already have some basic knowledge of English grammar, but most of them are still weak at speaking, reading, listening, especially, those who come from rural or remote areas where the conditions of learning English are very poor. About 30 % of the students who lived in areas with good conditions of learning English in secondary schools and high schools are at better level. Nevertheless, in high school, most of them could not use English communicatively, because they had been taught with the Grammar- Translation method with much focus on grammar rules, memorization of vocabulary, translation of texts and doing exercises to enter a university. Another reason was that they had few opportunities to communicate with foreigners or native speakers.

I wrote inform consent letters (see appendix 1) and delivered them to all the students of the class to ask them for their permission to participate in my research. I did the research with two female informants. Firstly I chose A because she has studied English for 7 years in the city high school with high level of communicative skills. Secondly I chose B because she has studied English for 3 years in a local school with low level of communicative English skills but she is good at writing and reading English. I saw many times A and B went and chatted with each other inside and outside the class and heard other students say that A and B were close friends.

Methods and methodology

At the beginning of my project, I explained my intentions to the students and asked them for their permission to conduct the research. I told two informants that I would record their spoken language as part of my research on how to develop their English oral fluency. Luckily, they agreed because A and B had good attitudes to me, to University, especially to learning English to find good jobs.

I also gave each student a consent form letter which might be useful in setting out clearly for learners what their participation would involve and how the results of the process would be used. The head of my department was aware of how and why I was conducting my research.

Learners interviewed their friends and wrote up friends' characteristics, attitudes towards group work and useful strategies of speaking English. The results might help them develop motivation in speaking English.

After collecting data I gave back my final draft of report to my students to check whether or not my interpretation of what they said corresponded with their own understanding. I formally thanked everyone who had helped me and sent copies of my findings to anyone who has been of substantial help to me.

I combined observational and field note techniques to organize data about behaviors, contexts, group organization and records of interactions between informants. Therefore, using notes to collect research data became more effective than other data collection techniques took over. Besides, I used a small hand-held recorder as a time saving option during group work activities and students' interviews. This allowed me to note important data while they were still fresh in my mind. I could also talk into the recorder, listen to the recordings again and start thinking.

I organized A to interview B in Vietnamese on their feelings and opinions about group work and learning experience during their break time of 20 minutes. I provided a set of preplanned questions (see appendix 7) in no fixed order and asked the group to audio-record their responses. I did this to in order to increase my own and my learners' understanding of students' feelings about group work. I used semi structured interviews between learner and learner because they ensured greater consistency, reliability and balance in the research relationship. Two students engaged in their free flowing conversational process in a friendly way to share with each other about their learning experience in speaking English and their perception of group work. I chose this approach to understand deeply about the factors affecting group work to develop English oral fluency.

I felt a lack of experience in writing up the final research findings. It worried me whether I was adopting the right approach, and that my data collecting methods became a bit slapdash and less thorough than they should have been. I felt pressured for time during the process and in writing the report because I also taught and did the research at the same time.

Chapter five: Analysis and Findings

I conducted the research with my students when they had started studying in the second term for two weeks. The first time, I observed speaking in the English class at the first period in the morning. The class had not had any examination of speaking in the second term of the first year. In the first term, A got mark 8 and B got 5 for speaking examination. We had two speaking periods in the same day per week. The second time, I observed the speaking fluency of A and B after one week of the first observation, at the first period in the morning. A sat next to B in the same front table of the classroom.

Before conducting the research for a week, I informed them that I would do the research in the class. And I delivered twenty four consent letters to all my students, asked them to tick the box if they agreed to participate, collected all letters after 5 minutes and read at home.

During observing, I used highlighter, sticky notes and collected data on set target in the observation sheet. I used themes and codes (see appendix 2) to organize and collect data in field notes when I was observing. I put the recorders in each group of the class.

Because desks and chairs were fixed and unmovable I asked my students to work in groups of three with their neighbors at the same desk and imagine a story about the picture (see appendix 3) on the blackboard. A and B were in the same group with C who could speak English very well.

At first, they were eager to talk in the group because they thought they had many things to speak about and the picture was very interesting. I just sat at my desk with books, looked and made notes in the observation sheets. When I observed I realized that A and B's oral English fluency was not interfered by with the noise of other groups.

I just required my students to create their own stories about the picture in their groups in 15 minutes and present their stories in front of the class. I saw almost all students looked very excited and smiled when I showed the picture and said: " The most interesting story would get good marks". I fixed the picture on the blackboard and explained about characters in the picture. A and B kept quiet for a while in their group and later A asked: " B, what is your story? And why will we have to do this task?" B was too shy and said nothing while A started speaking English. She had a huge amount of ideas about the picture to share with other members while B just listened to A and nodded her head. Often, B said " right", " ok" and looked at me. After speaking English for 3 minutes, A asked B to take note what she had said. Sometimes, A stopped speaking and asked others to express their ideas. B also spoke some short utterances to support the story. A commented on B and C's opinions. B almost always agreed with A and she just kept silent and looked very nervous to speak English. A and C dominated B while B had no more chance to practice. For example, B almost always asked questions and

read sentences which were written and said very short utterances like: " you should change this word into that word". Sometimes B suggested new ideas for the story but she was too shy to persuade others to agree therefore B looked unhappy in her group. After they finished the story, A began to chat in Vietnamese with another girl friend at the table behind about a film on TV that night while B turned around and exchanged her stories with other groups in Vietnamese. B wanted to talk but she had no chances in her group so she found another whom she could speak with. When the time was up, I asked each group to tell their story. When other groups were presenting, A did not pay much attention to that. A asked B to present the story in front of the class when I called them. B was too shy to speak and did not speak fluently and always looked at her note taking paper. C and A said " no" and they stood up and continued to present their own ideas. B sat down and felt more comfortable when she did not have to speak. The task was finished on time and almost all A and B's utterances were in English.

After the first class of observation, I asked students to be free for 20 minutes in the next period to interview in pairs. I paired A and B and recorded their conversation to understand about their feelings, difficulties and struggles of working in groups. I concluded that B felt intimidated when working with someone of much better ability although the more fluent students sometimes tried to help their partners. Moreover, B could not talk because she made a lot of mistakes and did not know how to say things in English. Although B wanted to talk she thought her friends would laugh at her when she spoke. My lesson was not interesting enough to encourage all students to engage in speaking although the picture was very good. Because I did not

give enough requirements and explanation of the task A and B did not understand what they should do in group work. I did not pay much attention to the group organization, task requirement and students' understanding.

A and B got good marks but they did not like my lesson. A and B did not feel satisfied with the lesson. A said that the lesson was not interesting enough and should be made clear for all students. Nevertheless, B liked to be in groups with A, and other more fluent students because she had chances to learn from them to broaden her knowledge and vocabulary.

After the first observation, I changed my mind about my teaching. I though about reasons why my students did not engage in their groups and decided that I should require them to produce a story with five or six simple tense and future tense sentences. And I should deliver this picture for all groups as a handout while the blackboard was used to present students' results. I should go around and listen to my students and encourage them to speak English.

In the next period, I rearranged the desks of the class in a U shaped arrangement of groups to allow an easy transition to plenary mode. Students grouped by themselves with friends who had the same interesting topics after they were provided some background knowledge of each topic. After collecting information of observing, I compared the results of two sessions to find out differences between A and B in oral English fluency in their groups. I would not give each group the same mark because this was unfair and created competitive groups rather than co-operative groups and totally defeats the purpose of grouping at the first time. I wrote the topic " favorite

places" and asked my students for related vocabulary. I made students involved in the task. A and B said aloud their vocabulary about this topic. Lan also mentioned some of her favorite places in Vietnam while Hoa asked me and her friends a lot of clarifying questions like " how do we say this word mean in English?" or " Can you explain again?" After that I let my student read one short passage about a famous place in Vietnam (see appendix 4) without name and asked my students to guess. A and B were very eager to talk because they had been this place. Later, I asked them to choose one picture of famous places (see appendix 5) to create a conversation to introduce this place in groups and used as many comparative adjectives as possible. I delivered chosen pictures for each group and said: " It is no problem if you make errors because you can learn something through getting it wrong." I asked all students to stand up and find other two partners to talk with. A and C decided to choose the same picture to discuss and called another C's friend. B joined in a group of two other friends who also lived in the rural area and had the same level of speaking English as her. Then they discussed to choosing a favorite place to talk about for 15 minutes. A had a lot of ideas to share with her partners. A talked loudly and continuously then C and his friend took a turn. A and B felt comfortable to talk with peers whom they wanted to talk with. B felt more confident to share ideas with others who had the same ability level. When other friends commented on B' opinions she also looked happy and tried her best to negotiate. She listened to others and took notes on their ideas. When B met with difficulties she asked me for help. And I explained and encouraged her work like: " that is good", " say it again", " thank you", " well done", etc. She encouraged others to talk and commented on their ideas. She said: " good",

" not suitable", " you just think more about this". She helped others to have chances to talk. When they had time left A's group continued to think more about how they might make their stories more interesting. When other groups were presenting, A and B listened carefully to them. A and B were almost eager to present their group's conversation.

Based on all the data, I found that students changed their feeling and behavior when they worked with different partners. It meant that group organization played an important role in developing students' English oral fluency. A and B spoke more fluently when they were in groups of the same ability level. In the second lesson, a safe environment had been achieved where everybody liked to work with each other. In the mixed group, A almost did nothing while B was reluctant to speak English. In the second session, when they were in groups with the partners on the same level they felt more relaxed to talk. I found that B spoke three times more English when working with students of the same ability than when she had more fluent partners. I concluded that the students were motivated to speak English but perhaps felts intimidated when working with someone of much better ability.

While listening to the taped conversation of the second observation I observed that members of B's group generally took turns to speak, that no individual was dominant, and that they helped each other with vocabulary. The conversations were quite fluent and accurate. B leaned on the table to speak with other partners. It was unavoidable for my students to use Vietnamese but it was not much.

However, the taped conversation of the first time indicated that, although A was very cooperative and tried to help her partner, she tended to dominate the conversation and overcorrect her partner without giving B much chance to talk.

From interviews, I found that my less able students liked to use English with more fluent partners when they had to be self-reliant, when I was not present, when they were not corrected all the time, and when they were not being tested or monitored.

Besides, based on the observation and interviews, it could be concluded that the students' English oral fluency was also be influenced by the teacher's preparation. In the first lesson, I did not provide enough explanations, knowledge and encouragement to help them understand and engage in speaking English. In the second lesson, my students felt very excited in speaking English when they had enough vocabulary and interest in the task.

Reflections

During this investigation, I learned a lot about my students' attitudes towards and abilities in using English. Gathering information from the students about how they use English was important to me. I discovered a way to deal with a class of mixed abilities and found a way to motivate my less able students. This project confirms my beliefs about the value of using group work and has reduced my anxiety about grouping less able students together. I can create different groups for different activities. Depending on the task, I will want to have students of different skill levels working together or students with the same level working together. For example, a harder task

might lead me to mix skill levels, however a task where outcome is not an important goal, the instructions are not difficult, and the process easy to follow, could lead to homogeneous grouping.

During doing this research, I ha