

Role Of Group Dynamics In Improving Esl Students' Participation In Speaking Sessions - Study On Indian Students

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ABSTRACT

This research paper examines how the group work affects individuals in an ESL classroom while developing language skills and encourages them to communicate and participate more actively. The primary aim of this study is to improve student participation in individual speaking sessions like extempore and JAM sessions which could be nerve racking for some students due to various fears such as stage fear, fear of humiliation, fear of making mistakes etc. The study involves a qualitative analysis performed through questionnaire as well as survey, and the results corroborate the positive correlation between the teamwork and students' participation in speaking sessions. Three groups of 20-30 students each, including both males and females, studying fifth semester in three different departments of an engineering college of Hyderabad, Telangana, India were selected. They were given speaking tasks which utilized group dynamics. After the tasks, the data from students was collected and analyzed. The findings support the primary aim of this study indicating that group dynamics play a remarkably positive role in improving students' participation in speaking tasks.

Keywords: *groupwork, collaborative learning, higher education, qualitative research, ESL classroom, student participation, speaking session.*

INTRODUCTION

The most common challenge an ELT teacher faces is to make students speak. Even though most of the Indian students already have an internal or external motivation (to increase their career prospects, to go abroad, etc.) to learn English, they still hesitate and are even reluctant to talk in English. The low self-esteem and fear of failure especially in front of others have been observed as major contributing factors in their reluctance to speak in English.

Teaching English to adults is different from teaching it to the children. Adults already have ego and may avoid situations that hurt their ego. This ego can create an obstacle in their learning English as second language. They are already well versed with their mother tongue and hence, they may find learning a new language quite unsettling. This is especially true in case of classroom environment because the students and their struggles with the language are being witnessed by their peers and their teachers or role models. Besides, in an Indian class, while there are students who are at beginner's level in learning English or have completed their schooling in their first language, there are also students who are already at intermediate or advanced level in learning English or have done their schooling in English medium. This status further raises inferiority complex and fear of failure among some beginner level students.

It has been observed that while many students participate in the class activities proactively to improve their English language skills or to showcase their skills, many students hesitate to participate or lose interest over a period of time due to low motivation or low self-esteem.

This study primarily focuses on countering these problems with doable activities as reliable solutions to enhance students' participation in classroom.

LITERATURE REVIEW: GROUP DYNAMICS

It has been observed that a group can have a very positive impact on individuals. The sense of belonging to a group encourages students to participate because they do not feel alone on the stage while speaking. Instead of feeling one against all, they feel supported and this kind of ambiance boosts their confidence. Second important element is competitive spirit of humans. We love being challenged. Especially when working in teams, students have a strong drive to win against the other team. This competitive spirit further motivates students to participate enthusiastically in the given task. Many studies have been conducted in this regard.

Hadfield (1992, 10) found that positive group dynamics can have a 'beneficial effect on the morale, motivation, and self-image of its members', and thus improve their learning. Wazzan, Mohammad Musaab (2015) in his study showed that classmates in a group play a crucial role in elevating each other's language skills. He also convincingly demonstrated that students feel more 'confident, relaxed, and supported' in a group. Gorse and Sanderson (2007) affirmed that the sense of belonging to a group can help students relax, have fun, improve moral, and boost confidence, thus providing them a satisfying learning experience. Dundis and Benson (2003, 35) stated that 'groups perform better when they sense themselves as a unified team with a shared sense of responsibility, if for no other reason than the task at hand.'

Keeping all the above studies in view, an activity was designed to incorporate the group dynamics and use it to help students face their stagefear effectively. Following are three underlying hypotheses used to design the activity:

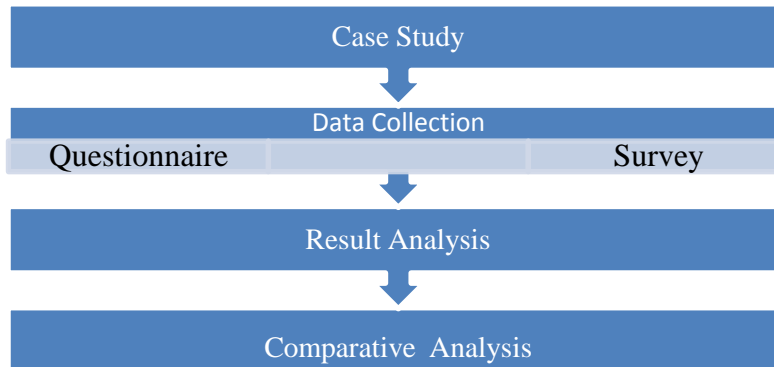
- 1) In a class, the peer to peer rapport has more impact on students' participation, so, when the speaker is pushed and motivated by the peers, the speaker feels more confident and interested to come on stage and participate in speaking sessions.
- 2) If students are divided in teams, every speaker will have to share the sense of responsibility for the team's victory or loss; so, they would feel more responsible and valuable.
- 3) Speaking anything would fetch at least some marks than speaking nothing at all. So, it would be only logical to speak than stay silent and it would also help the team.

Further, Bell (2001) and Gorse's (2002) studies of workgroups suggest that group interaction is unevenly skewed. Some participants dominate while others are blocked or suppressed by these dominant participants. To ensure that this does not happen, speakers could only participate once.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research design

This study utilizes qualitative research design by using questionnaire and survey to gather data about students' perspectives, feedbacks and attitude towards group learning as a tool for speaking sessions. Steps followed are given in the flow chart below:



Data Collection:

- 1. A questionnaire** containing yes/no answers is used to avoid confusion and ambiguity. Sometimes surveys may result in fatigue among the participants, which may affect the equality of the results. Hence, an attempt has been made to keep the questionnaire simple yet effective to achieve the desired output. The results are averaged using percentage.
- 2. Survey:** An open-ended survey has been conducted immediately after the end of the activity. Since it is an open-ended and subjective survey, students are free to express their opinions and feelings without being limited by the conventional multiple-choice questions. The results of this survey are averaged using percentage.
- 3. Survey based on Likert Scale:** To further validate the study and to ensure the reliability of the results, a 5-point Likert scale, with numeral values ranging from 1 to 5, has been used to understand students' attitudes and opinions about the style 1 and style 2 JAM.

Bar chart: The bar chart has been used to represent the response of the students in style 1 and style 2 JAMs because it is more convenient and easier to ascertain. Besides, the chart effectively depicted all the information in single graph, which made it easier to understand the comparative analysis of the performance.

Setting and participants:

This study was conducted in an ESL classroom on 3 groups consisting of 30 students each, studying in the B.Tech V semester at the Institute of Aeronautical Engineering. The Institute of Aeronautical Engineering is an autonomous and one of the top 10 institutes of engineering in the state of Telangana. It is also ranked 139 by in the engineering category as per National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) – 2019, Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD), Govt. of India. The institute attracts students belonging to diverse

religions, castes, cultures, and regions from across the country and hence, became a suitable choice for conducting the study. The diversity of the students helped make our random sampling more accurate. It ensured that the study results can be applied in multicultural, multiregional and multilingual contexts.

All the participants belonged to the 19-22-year age group, and had studied either in English medium, Telugu Medium or Hindi medium school. English is the second language or even third for all these students and they mostly used their first language while communicating to each other. In such case, classroom became the primary place for them to learn speaking in English.

Further, majority of these students come from families where their mother-tongue (Telugu, Hindi, Oriya, Punjabi, Tamil etc.) is used predominantly to communicate with each other. Only in some families, where the parents are working professional in IT field or teaching, the communication may happen in English. Even so, in joint families, grandparents mostly talk in mother tongue. Hence, exposure to English is less within the family. Even in the friends' circle, students use the language they can identify themselves with more, i.e. mother tongue.

Case study 1:

Participants: 20 students of Civil Engineering branch

Problem: When the JAM sessions (hereafter called Style 1 JAM) were held and a topic was given to the students to speak on it for a minute. The 11 of them who participated actively and happily were those who were either already good at English or those who had high self-esteem and were not afraid of making mistakes. The other 9 students were found very reluctant to speak even after they were provided enough encouragement. When they were counseled privately, they revealed the following reasons for not participating:

1. Stage fear
2. Lack of vocabulary to frame sentences
3. Fear of getting humiliated by their classmates

To solve these issues, an activity was designed and was given a veil of a game. The activity has been highly successful with 100% participation and has also received significantly improved participation in the other two groups where the same problem of hesitation among the students was observed.

ACTIVITY (Hereafter referred as Style 2 JAM):

Round 1: Table topics

Number of participants: 2 teams with 10 students each.

Rules and instructions:

- 1) Each speaker gets 30 seconds to think
- 2) They can take help from team members in that time.
- 3) No speaker can come more than once.
- 4) The more you speak, the more points you gain.

Round 2: Topic challenges

Rules and instructions:

- 1) 3 speakers of each team will participate in challenges.
- 2) Anyone can come but not more than once.
- 3) The longer you speak, the more points you gain.

Procedure: There were two rounds in style 2 JAM. For the first round, there were table topics. Here a speaker would come, pick the chit (a piece of paper where the topic was written) and announce the topic, get 30 seconds to prepare or take help from the team, and then speak on the topic for 1-3 minutes. The speakers from both teams come alternately. Grammar was kept as only one criterion and more marks were allocated to the duration of speaking, perspective of the speaker, quality of topic and Voice. (Evaluation sheet is given in **Appendix A**). Also, to avoid the voluntary participation of only intermediate or advanced level students, speakers were not allowed to participate more than once. This time, the participation from the students was 100%; also, the team members listened to the speaker more attentively. Furthermore, even the students who were previously reluctant to speak spoke for at least a minute.

Second round consisted of topic challenges, where only 3 participants from each team were to take topic challenges from other teams. The choice of those 3 participants was left on their teams. In this round, as expected, the advanced level speakers took upon the challenges to ensure the victory. Nonetheless, due to the rule of non-repeating of the participants, other speakers also got the chance.

In the end, due care was taken to give incentives and positive feedback to the students. Each of the students was appreciated for the unique positive feature of their speech to boost their self-esteem and sense of worth.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A survey and a questionnaire were conducted to validate the results; and the students' responses are given below.

Survey results and questions:

S. No.	Question	Response in percentage
1	Did you speak ONLY because you were divided in teams?	50%
2	Do you prefer team style JAM or the traditional style of JAM?	100% for Team Style JAM
3	Are you comfortable participating in any style of JAM?	50%
4	Will you participate more if a reward is announced?	100%
5	Will you participate even if there is no reward and just this style 2 JAM?	92%
6	Do you have stage fear?	100%
7.	Do you think dividing in teams helped you to speak?	92%
8.	Did you feel more satisfied with style 2 JAM when compared to Style 1 JAM?	92%
9.	Did you feel less nervous while participating in style 2 JAM when compared to Style 1 JAM?	92%

The questionnaire: Participants were given open ended questions (**Appendix B**). Their responses have been summarized below according to the frequency of the key words/phrases used.

Table 1: Responses to “What stops you from speaking in English?”

Keywords/phrases	Percentage
Vocabulary	20%
Stage fear and embarrassment	80%

Table 2: Responses to “Did you feel more comfortable participating in JAM because you were a part of the team?”

Keywords/phrases	Percentage
YES	100%
NO	0%

Table 3: Responses to “Why are you more interested in participating in Team style JAM?”

Keywords/phrases	Percentage
Idea Sharing	92%
Felt supported	8%

Table 4: Responses to “Did you participate only because you wanted your team to win?”

Keywords/phrases	Percentage
YES	8%
NO	92%

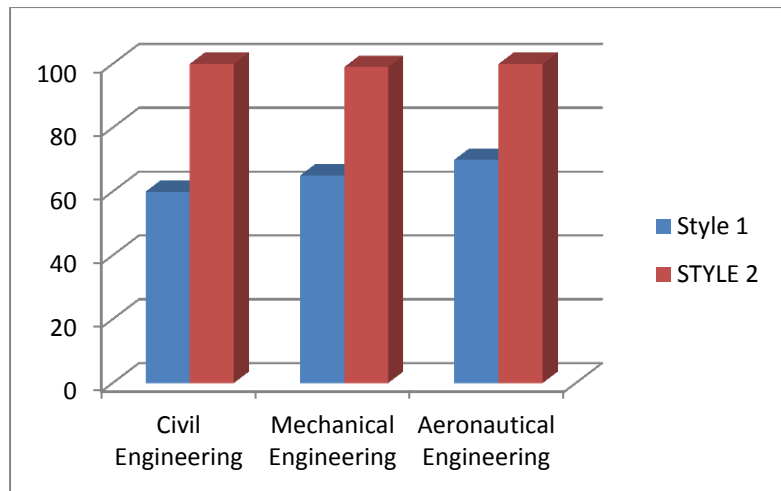
Table 5: Responses to “What motivated you to participate in team style JAM?”

Keywords/phrases	Percentage
Encouragement from team members	100%

Note: 60% of the students *also* cited knowledge sharing as one of the reasons for their participation. Interestingly, one student even wrote that he ‘forgot’ he had stage fear while participating in this style of JAM.

Table 6: Responses to “How do you feel when you are praised by your classmates or teachers for speaking?”

Keywords/phrases	Percentage
Happy and encouraged	90%
Confident	10%



Note: Style 1 refers to traditional style of JAM where each speaker is asked to come on a stage and speak on topic and Style 2 refers to the team style JAM introduced in this paper.

It is clear from the graph above that there was a significant improvement in participation from students of all three branches.

The results of the overall analysis also demonstrate that group can have a very positive and healthy impact on each participant. The fears participants feel are due to people and when they are supported by those people, their fears dissipate, and learning becomes fun and rewarding.

Conclusion:

In a controlled environment with limited scope, this study attempted to investigate the impact of group on individual to increase students’ participation in speaking sessions. The study showed that the sense of belonging to a group and the support of the group can help individuals significantly in overcoming their stage fear and thus increase their willingness to participate in such sessions. From the students’ responses in the questionnaire, it can be concluded that they feel more ‘encouraged’ and ‘comfortable’ while performing in groups. Besides, interaction within the group allows them to ‘share ideas’ which makes the whole group activity more worthwhile and enjoyable.

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