



**Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development**

**THE IMPLEMENTATION OF GROUP WORK IN MIXED ABILITY ESL  
CLASSROOMS IN SERIAN SECONDARY SCHOOLS.**

**ESTELLA SHARON ANAK BAMBOL**

**15605**

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CLT	Communicative Language Teaching
ESL	English as a Second Language
ULBS	Ujian Lisan Berasaskan Sekolah
MUET	Malaysian University Examination Test
SPM	Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia

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## ABSTRACT

### **The Implementation of Group Work in Mixed Ability ESL Classrooms in Serian Secondary Schools.**

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The study is conducted to investigate the implementation of group work in mixed ability ESL classrooms. The aim is focused on the teachers' current practice in implementing group work. The sample comprised 36 ESL teachers from 5 secondary schools in Serian District. The study was utilized a survey approach by employing a set of self designed semi-structured interview's questions. The data was analysed based on the qualitative framework. The study found out that the frequency of group work implementation occurred at average twice a week. It revealed three main purposes of group work that were to build the cooperation and collaboration skills, to increase the amount of the students converse in the target language and for peer teaching and learning. In terms of size and composition of the group, the study indicated that, the teachers preferred mixed ability grouping which consists of 4 to 6 members in a group. It also showed that, the teachers conduct group work based on the requirement of the task. The study also revealed that, the group work duration was at average 15 to 20 minutes. A few recommendations and implications have been highlighted in this study to improve the implementation of group work in mixed ability ESL classroom.

## ABSTRAK

### **Kaedah Pelaksanaan Strategi Kerja Berkumpulan dalam Kelas Bahasa Inggeris Pelbagai Kebolehan di Daerah Serian.**

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*Kajian ini dijalankan untuk mengenalpasti pelaksanaan kerja berkumpulan dalam kelas Bahasa Inggeris pelbagai kebolehan. Tujuannya lebih fokus kepada kaedah pelaksanaan strategi berkumpulan yang terkini. Kajian ini melibatkan 36 orang guru Bahasa Inggeris dari 5 buah sekolah menengah di Daerah Serian. Ia dilaksanakan menggunakan set teknik temubual. Data dari kajian ini dianalisa berdasarkan rangka kerja kualitatif. Hasil kajian mendapati kekerapan pelaksanaan kerja berkumpulan adalah dalam purata dua kali seminggu. Kajian mendapati ia dilaksanakan untuk membina kemahiran berkumpulan secara berkoperatif dan berkolaborasi, untuk meningkatkan kuantiti menggunakan bahasa sasaran dan untuk mewujudkan pengajaran dan pembelajaran bersama rakan sebaya. Dari segi bilangan dan komposisi kumpulan, guru-guru lebih cenderung kepada kumpulan pelbagai kebolehan yang mempunyai bilangan 4 ke 6 ahli. Selain daripada itu, kajian juga menunjukkan bahawa guru-guru menjalankan kerja berkumpulan disebabkan keperluan aktiviti pembelajaran seperti kemahiran bercakap, menulis dan komponen kesusasteraan. Hasil dapatan menunjukkan jangka masa untuk kerja berkumpulan adalah di antara 15 ke 20 minit. Beberapa cadangan dan implikasi disorotkan untuk memperelokan kaedah pelaksanaan kerja berkumpulan di dalam kelas bahasa Inggeris pelbagai kebolehan.*

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **1.0 Introduction**

This chapter presents the background of the study followed by statement of problem, objectives of the study, significance of the study, the definition of the key terms and scope of the study.

#### **1.1 Background of the Study.**

A mixed ability class is a norm in many classrooms setting including the second language classroom. In Malaysia, it is one where the students of different ability levels learn together in the same classroom. Some are highly proficient, some are fair and some are weak in their mastery of the second language (Department of Language Education, 2001). Generally, the students differ in terms of rate of learning, range of vocabulary, linguistics knowledge, mastery skill and learning styles (Mohd. Sofi Ali, 2003).

In the 1970s, the language teaching and learning in Malaysia was replaced by Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) (Siaw, 2005). The aim was to ensure the students is able to communicate effectively in the target language. This is to ensure the students able to meet their needs in their

everyday life such as for knowledge acquisition and workplace needs. (Huraian Sukatan Pelajaran Bahasa Inggeris, 1976). In CLT approach, the students must learn not only the language rules but the use of language in the context suitability. It develops the student's language ability that simulates the target performance. (Nunan, 2001). This shift had urged educators and experts to search for new methods and techniques to fulfill the requirement (Tuanku Mohani Tuanku Jaafar, 1992).

In Malaysian English Syllabus, one of the stated considerations in language teaching is to extend student's English proficiency (Huraian Sukatan Pelajaran, Bahasa Inggeris, 2000). In corresponding to this consideration, the Ministry of Education emphasized that the students must be given the opportunity to take part in the activity that requires them to use the language. There also should be an adjustment between the curriculum teaching approaches and the learning materials to suit their needs. Due to this consideration, the Education Ministry has suggested many activities that requires the students to use the language and. One of the listed activities is group work.

### **1.1.1 Group Work in Language Learning**

In English language teaching, group work had a long established history. It is known as a worthwhile practice (Chen & Hird, 2006). It is observed as one of the popular teaching and learning practice and become the integral part of English language repertoire in primary school (Doughty, Pica & Young, 1987).

In Malaysian ESL classroom, group work is seen as one way of learning (Chitravellu, Sithamparam & Teh, 1995). It is accepted as one of the effective strategy in the development of student's communicative proficiency (Chen

et.al, 2006). It is also highlighted, as a means of giving the students the opportunity to practise the target language. (Nor Azmi, 2000).

## **1.2 Statement of Problem.**

Teaching a mixed ability classroom is always classified as a controversial issue in teaching profession (Hill, 2007). In Copur (2005), the difference is in terms of the student's learning pace, cultural background, learning style, and interest. Owing to these differences, the teacher finds it is difficult to decide on suitable techniques and materials that could be used in the classroom.

In relation to the problem, the Ministry of Education stated that, the teaching approaches, the lesson and the curriculum material for learning need to be adjusted to meet the students' differences. (Huraian Sukatan Pelajaran, Bahasa Inggris Tingkatan 1 hingga 5, 2003).

Due to the issue, several studies on mixed ability classroom have pointed out that, one of the solutions that could tackle the problem is group work (Nor Azmi, 2000). This is because, many experts claimed it as one of an excellent technique which has ability to mould the collaboration and cooperation among the students of different proficiency level (Copur, 2005: Rose, 2005) It also helps the students to progress at the pace of their ability (Parkinson, 1994).

Study also reported that, group work has a positive impact in achieving maximum participation in language learning (Kurtnick, Blatchford & Baines, 2003). This is because it engages the students in sharing, arguing and justifying process when they discuss among themselves.

However, the implementation of group work does not always result in success. Researcher had found out that, students groupings can causes classroom management problem (Angelo & Cross, 1993).

From other point of view, it was found that some students find it unpleasant to speak in the target language because the others might label them as a show off. Due to that, the students will feel offended and tend to keep silent. An inability to accept critiques will decrease their self-esteem and lead to their passiveness. It also can cause the students to lose interest in learning the language (Cross, 1992).

This situation indicates that, the implementation of group work has defeated the purpose to get the students to practice the language (Hodgkinson & Sebba, 2006)

Due to this need, teacher has to plan the student grouping carefully with regard to aspects such as the purpose and the frequency of implementation, the group size and composition, the type of learning task and the allocation of time to achieve the optimum objective of teaching and learning. Therefore, this study will attempt to investigate the current practice in the implementation of group work in mixed ability ESL classrooms.

### **1.3 Objective of the Study.**

The study attempts to investigate the implementation of group work in mixed ability ESL classes. In order to achieve the main objectives, the study will thus attempt to answer the following questions:

- a). How often does the teacher use group work in mixed ability ESL classroom and for what purpose ?
- b). How does the ESL teacher decide on the size and composition of the group in mixed ability ESL classrooms?
- c). What kind of learning tasks and how long is the duration of time that are assigned for the group to complete in mixed ability ESL classrooms?

### **1.4 Significance of the Study**

This study is carried out to obtain information on how ESL teachers implement group work in mixed ability ESL classrooms. The findings of the study may provide useful guidelines and information for the future teachers who plan to implement group work in mixed ability ESL classrooms.

Mixed ability classes not only found in language classes but in most subjects. Therefore, the findings of the study will also contribute to other related body of research that intended to improve the way teachers implement students grouping in mixed ability classrooms.

## **1.5 Definition of Terms**

The definitions below are to clarify the important terms used in this study.

### **Group Work**

Nunan (2001) defines group work as a task and exercise completed by the learners working in a small group cooperatively. Through the task and exercise, they learn to solve language problems in systematic way. They also learn type of language use in different situation.

### **Mixed Ability ESL Classes**

According to Obsoka (2007), mixed ability classes is a class that consists of students who display a number of differences in learning abilities, motivation, previous exposure to learning, learning styles, personalities and attitudes.

### **Size of the Group**

Teaching Guides (2006), defines size of the group as number of the member in the group. The number can be formed randomly, teacher-selection and students-selection.

### **Composition of the Group**

Encarta (2007) defines composition of the group as the state or condition of belonging to a group such as species, social class, team, club or political party. In the context of this study, it is defined as the members of the group that varies in term of age, levels of participation, seating arrangement and genders (Anderson & Bryson, 2000).



## **Learning Task**

Learning task is a set of action which accomplish a job, problem or assignment that related to teaching and learning (Wikipedia, 2006). In the context of this study, language learning tasks refers to the type of activities incorporated with group work in their English language classroom.

## **Duration of Time**

Duration of time is a specific length or period of time (Hallam et.al, 2005). In this context of study, duration of time refers to a length of time given to a group of students to accomplish the given task.

## **1.6 Scope of the Study**

The scope of the study is only based on ESL teacher's point of view in implementing group work in mixed ability classrooms in Serian District. Therefore, the discussion issue is only focused on the teacher pedagogic practice in implementing group work in the study area.

This study will not involve the student's perception on the implementation of group work in ESL classroom.

## **1.7 Summary**

This chapter discusses the background of the study, the statement of problem, the objectives, the significance, the definition of the key terms and the scope of the study.

Group work is one of suggested activity stated in Malaysian Curriculum Specification to achieve the learning objective in English language. It was claimed has a positive impact to achieve maximum participation in language learning. Group work is also seen as one way of learning and accepted as one

of effective and excellent strategies in classroom teaching. Nevertheless, group work activities do not result successfully. The implementation of the strategy can cause classroom management problem and the students to lose their interest in language learning.

Due to this problem, this study investigates the practice of implementing group work in mixed ability ESL classroom. It focuses on ESL teacher's pedagogic practice and views in implementing group work in mixed ability classes. This includes the frequency and the purpose of implementing group work, the size and the composition of the group, the type of learning task and the duration of group work. It is hoped that the findings of this study will provide useful guidelines for the teachers and other related body that plan to implement group work in their classroom.

The next chapter of the study will touch on the purpose, the benefits and the challenges in implementing group work in classroom. It also will discuss the group size and composition, the type of learning task and the teacher's role. It will also present the empirical studies from different settings and contexts.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **2.0 Introduction**

This chapter reviews the literature on the implementation of group work in classrooms. It presents the different purposes of group work in classroom practice, the goals, the benefits and the challenges in implementing group work. This chapter also presents the empirical studies on group work implementation and the discussion on a number of aspects that need to be taken into account in students grouping.

#### **2.1 The Purpose of Implementing Group Work in Mixed Ability ESL Classroom.**

Group work is implemented in language classroom teaching because it is believed able to develop social interaction (Parkinson, 1994; Hilke, 1990; Johnson & Johnson, 1985). This is because; the technique is one of the crucial aspects in the student's learning development.

It was found able to provide the opportunity for the students to practice the target language by interacting and sharing on the discussion task. The process allows the students to paraphrase, to explain, to describe and to clarify. (Freiberg & Driscoll, 1992 cited in Nor Azmi, 2000).

Group work also fosters a deeper and more active learning process (Teaching Guide, 2005). In this situation, the students are exposed to different approaches and ways of thinking.

From another point of view, group work builds the collaborative and cooperative learning among different level of proficiency (Copur, 2005). It gives the students the opportunity to learn and to teach each other by sharing, helping and supporting. At the same time, the students share the pleasure of common goals.

The elaboration on different purposes of students grouping indicates the aims to help the students to develop their level of proficiency in the second language learning. This is done by offering the students the opportunity to use the language in the real situation.

## **2.2 The Benefits in Implementing Group Work.**

Studies claimed that students grouping in mixed ability ESL classroom have several benefits. Wintersgill (2007) reported that, it provides the opportunities to practice and to learn the target language from others. This is because the nature of group work involves the students in generating, expressing, classifying and arguing process. Meanwhile Nor Azmi (2000) stated that, the process does not only exposes the students to different ways of thinking but it also allows the students to practice different kind of language forms and functions.

Apart from that, the process also provides the students the opportunity to develop their skills in various communication problems which can be expected occurs in the spoken exchanges (Bygate, 1993). This is because, the process involves the student's ability to check on specific meaning, to alter wording, to correct errors, to find words and phrases in order to present the correct ideas and meaning.

Then Long and Porter (1985) pointed out that, the most frequent argument on students grouping in mixed ability classroom is where the lower proficiency students learns from the better students (Cited in Bygate, 1993). In this process, the lower proficiency students will exposed to multiple ways of thinking when they listen to different complex of ideas. At the same time, it also allows them to discover the language used in a richer and connected way. At the end, they will gradually improve their level of proficiency in the target language.

In Davis (2002) the study stated that, the students learn more and retain longer when they work in a group. This is because; the process allows the students to learn the language faster due to the opportunity to apply the target language in the real situation. At the same time, the students explore the language rules and functions.

Meanwhile Nor Azmi stated that, the implementation of group work builds the student's awareness on the language choice, phrases and meaning. This is occurred when the students have accessed too many supportive teachers (Copur, 2005). They have the ability to remediate each other's weaknesses and understanding including the language used (Angelo & Cross, 1993). This efficient support helps the students to develop their awareness not only on the language used but also on the accuracy of the information.

### **2.3 The Challenges in Implementing Group Work.**

Group work has a great potential in mixed ability language classroom yet it can be problematic due to the individual differences (Tribe, 1994).

Bacon (2005) identified that the implementation of group work does not ensure the cooperation and collaboration among the group members (Cited in Wintergills). This is occurred because the group members are formed from different rate of learning ability. In this situation, the better one normally dominates the discussion while the weaker one becomes the follower. Therefore, this situation defeats the purpose of peer teaching and learning that supposed to be performed in the group (Cross, 1992).

Meanwhile in Bardon (2005), the feature of individual accountability is hardly found in students grouping (cited in Wintersgills, 2007). This is because most of the students perform listening role during the discussion and only a few assure the speaking role. There also some students do not even bother about the discussion. At the end, the group task is only accomplished by a few members while the rest become the passengers. Owing to this situation, the level of participation is high for a few group members but minimal for most of them (Tribe, 1994).

In Long et.al (1985), students grouping allow the development of speaking and listening skill (Cited in Bygate, 1993). However in Ediger (1994), group work is seen as the avenue for the students to converse in their mother tongue. This is because the implementation provides the opportunity for the students to talk about irrelevant matters. This

phenomenon then will invite the increasing level of noise and end up in classroom management (Chitravellu et.al 1995). In the context of language learning, it is failed to achieve the maximum practice in the target language.

In Holtham, Melville and Manmohan (2007), the peer teaching and learning that occurred in group work is believed able to motivate the students to be more active and self directed. This is because one of the aims of group work is to build the student's level of confidence to use the target language in freer communication situation. However, the aim may not always result in positive way (Chitravellu et.al, 1995). This is because; the nature of group work allows the other members to listen and to check on the language error. The feedback on this action may not be pleasant and some students will feel offended. Thus to avoid being criticized, the students will choose to be silent. This situation shows that, group work is failed to provide non-threatening atmosphere.

## **2.4 Size of Group Membership**

The size of students grouping is the primary features in group work structure. It is an important aspect in devising a suitable activity in the classroom teaching (Kurtnick et.al, 2003). According to the local study conducted by Nor Azmi (2000), the size of students grouping that commonly use in classroom is as followed.

Pair work or dyad is one of efficient types in students grouping. It is an effective grouping because it is able to assure the group members participates actively. Meanwhile the expert associates it with Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (Topping, 1994). Kurtnick et al. (2003) and Burner and Byrds (2003, cited in Hallam et.al, 2005) claimed it as one of the effective grouping when dealing with open-ended problem

solving, brainstorming and practicing the communicative skills. This is because, pair work forces the stronger students to minimize the range of vocabulary and the slang when explains the idea and the problem to the others members. (Orstein et.al. 2004). Meanwhile in mixed ability classrooms, pair work is one of effective strategy to build the bond of friendship. This is because, the aspect is important in integrating the low proficiency students into the group.

Another common group size is triad. Triad consists of three group members. This type of grouping is quiet rare and heavily criticizes especially with the regard to problem solving (Kagan, 1998). Meanwhile Mcavoy (1998) claimed it allows possible domination by any two group members against the third member. This situation may cause interpersonal dislike among the group members (Cullingford, 1998).

Students grouping around 4 to 6 members are the most common in any classroom teaching. It is also known as a small or cluster grouping (Nor Azmi, 2003: Kurtnick et.al 2003). It is seen as the most flexible and works best on the discussion task (Davis, 1999). Small group functions successfully when it involves narrative task likes social study chapter, short study and biography project. Johnson and Johnson (1994) labeled it as the most effective grouping in pursuing cooperative synthesis task.

The other group size is large group. Large group is also a common grouping in classroom teaching. It normally consists of 7 to 10 group members. Borich (2000) stated that, large group suitable for big group discussion likes play production, language games and role play, concept teaching, pattern and abstractions. It tends to vary a wide interest and group participation (Holtham et.al 2006). Due to this aspect, the group members do not really actively engaged.