Effect of Grouping Lower Output Learners on Oral Production

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Abstract

During language acquisition it is necessary for learners to have opportunities to attempt and practice the structures they are acquiring. This study deals with the effect of grouping verbally weaker or excluded students together for small group work on the amount of their oral output and consequently on reinforcing their language acquisition. It was felt that this policy might relieve them from the pressure of working with incompatible or incongenial partners and, provide them with the resources of a more accessible and linguistically equivalent group.

The research was carried out in two stages. The first with randomly assigned groups and then with an extra group created from members who were felt to have been unable to contribute equally to the previous work. Throughout the study the groups' output was recorded. These recordings were examined to see if there had been any change in the level of contribution of these selected students. The limited amount of data yielded seemed to indicate that there was a substantial gain for certain individuals but these results can also be interpreted as being due to other factors such as accustomisation to the process, variations in task difficulty or the approach of the end-of-year assessments.

Key words ：language acquisition, group work, oral output

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Introduction

In language classes that utilise group work as one of the main methods of aiding language acquisition I noticed that in almost every group there were one or two learners who did not or could not contribute significantly to the interaction and consequently were deprived of , or were depriving themselves of, opportunities to acquire linguistic proficiency. This is an attempt to study the effects on their oral output of regrouping such EFL students with others who had also exhibited limited production in their previous groups.

Background

The subjects of my research were about 60, 15 to 16-year-old senior high school students grouped into three classes of twenty to twenty-two students. These classes were originally formed on the basis of academic achievement and goals. One of the classes (D) was meant to be composed of more academically talented students who wished to follow a science and math based academic track. Another class (E) was for students who were stronger in literature and language. The third class, (C) was theoretically meant to be composed of less scholastically able or focussed students. However there were many exceptions to these criteria in each class and there were great gaps between motivation levels. Finally there were some students who struggled to meet the school's scholastic requirements. I met them in oral communication classes held once a week over the school year. Due to the various events and national holidays that pepper the academic calendar there was a disparity in the number of times each group met.

The objective of the course was one of "general English proficiency". Two teachers were in charge: a native speaking Japanese teacher and myself. We taught each class alternately in separate classrooms and as the native speaking partner I was expected to provide the students with oral practice.

Besides giving the students opportunities to make presentations, do information gaps and other communicative activities I also devoted more than half of class time to group work in various forms. As this would give them a chance to learn to control and negotiate their output more independently. At the same it would enable me to aid them more efficiently as there would be fewer centres of activity to monitor and the students would be able to consult each other when they were in doubt.

Initially I formed the groups based on their previous seating proximity in the class as this system might produce a useful heterogeneity; it being "generally considered advantageous to group higher level students with lower level students. The rational is that the higher level students will be able to help the lower level students, as well as themselves. By developing alternative ways of articulating their ideas, higher level are increasing their range of language that can be used in a particular situation." (Cutrone, p75). However "Homogeneous grouping (according to language proficiency or other factors) can ease classroom management but can create group labelling problems and inhibit learner-to-learner tutoring opportunities" (Olsen & Kagan, 1992) in Oxford (1997 p.446).

I also felt it would save class time that might otherwise be spent moving around the classroom as they searched and negotiated for seating. Also it prevented the occurrence of students "embarrassment of not being chosen for a group" as one of Leki's (2001 p.49) subjects 'Ling' worried. Luckily my class room was designed to hold forty-eight students so there was ample space for a clear gap between each group. Each class was divided into groups named after colours: blue, yellow, pink, and green; with five or six members each. This was suitable for our first activity which was a job interview role play with members interviewing students from other groups and going and being interviewed in their turn; as

the large group size allowed them to split the burden of the activity enabling them to take and update notes for their final conclusion as other members asked questions. However for other activities this was too large and unwieldy a number of students to allow for satisfactory participation. Perhaps as Cohen and Intili (1981) in Cohen (1994, p29) "Learning to delegate authority to groups is not an easy task for teachers" and that I along with other teachers was unconsciously "afraid of losing control of the classroom and thus reduced the number of groups so that they could use direct supervision." I also became aware of the possibility that "Random grouping or interest-based grouping can provide a perception of fairness, although it can also create possible incompatibilities and "loser teams" (Olsen & Kagan, 1992) in Oxford (1997 p.446).

Problems

As the term progressed I saw that some of the less motivated students did not feel that the oral work they did would have any great effect on their term-end scores as they need only communicate in the target language while I was within earshot. Thus it proved difficult to keep them fully on-task. On the other hand any written work that these activities gave rise to or that had been given as a different task was completed to a much more satisfactory degree.

Especially I had become concerned about those students (one or two in every group) that did not seem to be contributing much to the discussion and planning of the work and who also seemed to have been able to contribute less than the other group members towards the final product. My initial impression was that they were simply slipstreaming behind the effort of the other group members. They could often be identified by their sitting slightly apart from, or turned away from the rest of the group, by their absences from the group area to go and speak to other students and, occasionally by the odd instance of bullying or abuse they received from or gave

the other members. I then thought that it might be due to a lack of English knowledge or communication skills on the part of these students but, on looking at their written work I could not say this was always the case as some were well above average and others well below. Also as I often specified that the object of the class was communication and increased fluency rather than accuracy I thought that weaker students might feel more at ease using English. 'Rex' one of the quiet students studied by Townsend and Fu said "I don't understand what's going on so I can't say anything."(Townsend and Fu 1998, p.14) but as in this class the use of the students own language was allowed and everything was freely translated, their disengagement cannot be exclusively blamed on a lack of comprehension. On closer inspection a common point seemed to be that they did not enjoy an equal relationship with the other group members. They seemed on the whole to be less extroverted and communicative than their co-members(In other words quieter).

I feel this phenomenon of unintegrated students is very important if group work is to have a successful outcome for all concerned. Young learners particularly seem to be more influenced by the people or 'whos' in their lives rather than the objectives and methods, the 'whats' and 'hows'. I clearly remember from my own secondary school days that it was the personalities of my teachers that influenced my attitude to class rather than the content of the subject.

"While students' ages, levels of competence in the L2, and experience working in groups certainly have a large impact; learners' personalities and attitudes perhaps have the greatest on what happens in the group" (Wright 1987) in Cutrone (2002 , p74)

In some cases the gap was extreme with a person of retiring nature working with students who showed a great deal of immaturity and aggressiveness. In other cases the quieter member was sometimes extremely withdrawn and refused to cooperate or even participate in the task. I inferred from their

interaction or lack of it, that this situation was not limited to oral English class, but was probably the ordinary state of affairs. I was reluctant to change the focus of the class from group work yet at the same time had to take some steps to salvage the course for these alienated students.

Taking this statement by Jane Townsend that "The interaction of individual personalities and preconceived attitudes toward fellow students apparently has a powerful influence on attention and interest. Fear of peers' judgment may be another reason why some students shrink from speaking out." (1998, p.78) as identifying the most likely reason for these problems I decided to experiment with group composition to see what, if any, change occurred in the student output.

Literature Review

Group work as a method for fostering language learning appears to be well established. The literature appears to have moved away from research trying to prove or estimate its worth compared to other systems of organisation such as teacher based presentation and pair work, and towards attempts to discover the factors and conditions necessary for successful or optimal group work, the performance of individual students within the group. Research also seems to be concerned with the question of equality. "A thorough search of the recent research literature reveals that numerous studies have progressed beyond the black box approach to one in which various features of cooperative learning are manipulated so as to highlight the importance of particular conditions for success on different kinds of instructional outcomes." Cohen (1994, p2)

Rebecca Oxford in a very, for me, informative article clarifies certain terms by arguing "that cooperative learning, collaborative learning, and interaction are three strands in the communicative L2 classroom. Cooperative learning refers primarily to an array of highly structured goals and techniques

for learning. Collaborative learning is more philosophically oriented, with the goal of acculturating students into the immediate community of learners and the wider world of the target language and culture. Interaction is a varied and broad concept related to a number of key themes, and refers to personal communication, which is facilitated by an understanding of four elements: language tasks, willingness to communicate, style differences, and group dynamics." Oxford (1997, p452) She goes on to state that cooperative learning is seen as the most common form of learning but that they overlap considerably in the language classroom.

In a study of the efficacy of group work in providing opportunities to restructure communication Teresa Pica (1987) found that in the area of group decision making where, free from the dominating presence of the language-expert teacher, she expected to find an atmosphere fostering negotiation of meaning, she instead found a new hierarchy had arisen. "The more verbally assertive students monopolized the interaction which led to what only appeared to be a 'group decision." and that, "Typically the less linguistically proficient students participated infrequently, with considerable gaps between speaking turns, while the more expressive students supplied most of the talk and took most of the turns." (Pica 1987, p15) In the end as a generator of real interaction she found simply asking the students to work as a group inferior to information gaps in providing opportunities for students to communicate as equals.

"In actual practice, the role relationships shaped by decision-making did not motivate students to … participate at all.The result was also disturbing because activities like the decision-making discussion … have become extremely popular in classrooms" Pica (1987, p.16)

Elizabeth Cohen (1994) in a major article dealing with studies of group work across various subjects such as math,

computer studies, and the social sciences; on examining the conditions and modifications to instructions and interaction necessary to achieve desired outcomes found that "The research reviewed also suggests that it is necessary to treat problems of status within small groups engaged in group tasks with ill-structured problems." Also while group work is "a way to manage academic heterogeneity in classrooms with a wide range of achievement in basic skills." (Cohen 1994, p.1) there is a necessity of ensuring the tasks assigned are true group tasks. If they can be completed as individuals then weaker students will be side lined and get little benefit from interacting with their stronger counterparts. She also goes on to say that equal rates of participation are signs of productivity for those of us who are trying to foster attitudes of equality towards other language users.

One study cited by Cohen that I found particularly interesting was carried out by Dembo and McAuliffe (1987) in which certain students were publicly credited with fictitious, higher than average scores. These same students then went on to dominate their group interaction even though they did not really possess superior ability. The researchers "created an artificial distinction of average and above-average ability with a bogus test of problem-solving ability, described as relevant to an upcoming experimental task. Higher status students (defined as those publicly assigned above- average scores on the bogus test) dominated group interaction on the experimental task, were more influential, and were more likely to be perceived as leaders than low status students. Academic status is the most powerful of the status characteristics in the classroom because of its obvious relevance to classroom activities. In responding to hypothetical learning groups on a questionnaire, students were much more likely to approve of leadership behaviour on the part of a good student than on the part of whites or males (McAuliffe, 1991; in Cohen 1997, p.23).

These findings are supported by research undertaken by Anderson and Kilduff (2009) as reported in TIME (2009, March, p.41) We allow "dominant individuals attain influence because they behave in ways that make them appear more competent along both task and social dimensions—even when they actually lack competence". Anderson and Kilduff (2009, p 492) Or, as one catchy headline put it, "A new study shows leadership is often just loudership" TIME (2009, March, p.41).

Zoltan Dörnyei in a later article in The Modern Language Journal 81 (1997) on the psychological aspects of cooperative learning cites group cohesiveness as "one of the most important attributes of the successful communicative language class."(Dörnyei 1997, p.485). In the cooperative learning setting, factors which promote this are said to be built into the process itself as effective group work includes an element of positive interdependence. Citing work with Clément and Noels, (1994) Dörnyei contends that cohesiveness also raises motivation and decreases "the likelihood of 'free-riding and social loafing' "(p.488).

However Dörnyei's examination of Johnson and Johnson (1995) shows that this is not an automatic phenomenon. It often has to be set in motion by a teacher or other leadership figure. "As Johnson and Johnson state 'We are not born instinctively knowing how to interact effectively with others. Interpersonal and group skills do not appear magically when they are needed.' "(Johnson and Johnson 1995; in Dörnyei 1997 p.484) They also "mention three other conditions necessary for the effectiveness of CL: individual accountability, mastery of social skills, and regular group processing. They argue that CL works best when the group rewards for learning are combined with individual accountability (Johnson &Johnson, 1995; in Dörnyei 1997, p484)

Leki (2001) citing numerous authorities states that "K-

12 researchers have concluded that, to succeed, group work must be carefully structured; the students must be thoroughly prepared through social skill-building activities; assignments must be open-ended rather than have pre-set answers; and the task must be such that a group rather than only an individual is truly required to accomplish it."(Leki 2001, p.41) She then goes on to say to focus on the area of social /academic skill building as being vital to successful outcomes in this area. In a very empathetic account of the experiences of non-native English speaking students(NNES) doing academic group work with native speaking peers, Leki found that negative experiences on their part were not uncommon. Referring to Toohey and Day's (1999) work, it appeared that group work "afforded bilingual children only ambiguous access to community language resources" (Leki 2001, p.41) Subjects in Leki's study found that even before the groups had a chance to cohere their potential participation was limited by doubts harboured by their native speaking comrades about their ability to make a "significant contribution" (Leki 2001, p47). They were consequently side lined while most of the work was done by more confident and assertive speakers even though the targets of that work were not specifically language related. Even in more friendly groups the NNESs were automatically placed in the mode of "peripheral participants", "apprentices" (Leki 2001, p48) rather than fully fledged group members. While recognising the enthusiasm and skill of the teachers in designing group tasks Leki sees the lack of appropriate social skill building before undertaking the tasks as obviating their goals.

For Rambo and Matheson (2003) in their study which refers frequently to Leki's "The causes of the problems for the underperforming groups seemed to be rooted in the group dynamics as well as difficulties in understanding and conceptualizing the project process" (Rambo and Matheson 2003, p.11)They sought to avoid the problems of it being "usually the most competent person in the group who ends up taking responsibility, leading to unequal workloads and sometimes dissatisfaction with the intervention process." (Rambo and Matheson 2003, p.16) and to ensure equality of participation in their presentation course by assigning clearly defined yet mutually complementary coordinating roles to each participant, and also by boosting teacher awareness of the group's internal situation by requiring each coordinator to submit ongoing reports as part of their assessment portfolio; thereby providing the instructors with insights into the conditions prevailing in each group. The researchers themselves saw improvement in the end-product; the presentations themselves, being "on the whole clearer, more intensively researched and analysed," (Rambo and Matheson 2003, p.20) However they also acknowledged the paradox that the more independence monolingual language-learning groups get, the greater the likelihood that they will use their mother tongue for higher level conceptual thinking.

Articles by Jane S. Townsend (1998) alone and in partnership with Danling Fu (1998), while dealing with whole class discussion, draw attention to the personal reasons for many students' seeming failure to participate fully. They list cultural and self-confidence issues, "all six students worried that they might appear publicly foolish" (Townsend and Fu 1998, p.11), as well as personal hostility to other participants as major causes. However lack of time to formulate thoughts and language, whether they were native or L2 speaking students, "each student was especially oppressed by the need to think and speak quickly."(p.4) was cited as the most influential factor. Giving time, pre-writing exercises and "a chance to rehearse their thinking by talking with a congenial partner" (Townsend 1998, p.79) are among the main measures they suggest to help quiet students express themselves.

Finally Pino Cutrono in the early in the century working in an EFL context. while acknowledging that the value of

communicative teaching is recognised in professional circles in Japan, also points out that many students and teachers have yet to realise group work's potential as a legitimate way to learn and echoes Townsend and Fu's findings that peer discussion may not be immediately translatable to any cultural context. .

Research Process

The first stage of my research involved leaving the groups from the previous tasks unchanged and setting new tasks that involved making audio recordings of their own output. This was to provide some examples against which to assess any changes in production that might occur later on. I also thought that creating actual copies of their oral work would motivate the students to take it more seriously.

I opted to use hand held digital voice recorders as the alternative would have been to move the class to the school's language laboratory which would not always be available and which had fixed seating that obstructed the formation of groups. These devices on the other hand are extremely flexible in that they are easily transported to the classroom and can be handed around and manipulated by the students; eliminating the need for switching around chairs or clearing of spaces to place the device. These recorders also had the virtue of being different colours making it easy to identify which recorder belonged to which group by matching their colours.

To try to lessen any stage-fright, nerves, or reticence their presence might generate I introduced them as being far less sophisticated and far cheaper and shoddier than the i-pods® and mobile phones they themselves brought to school every day (against the rules).

The major difficulty with these devices was teaching the students how to operate them easily. Sometimes they handed the device in with nothing recorded as it had not been switched on as they performed the task or they created multiple empty and garbled recordings with no indication as to which was the final version. These problems lessened as they grew more accustomed to using them. But there were still instances where work was lost due to oversight or technical failure.

Another drawback to the handheld devices was that some students placed their mouths too close to the built in microphones, overwhelming them and generating a deafening static-like noise. While this was annoying and sometimes made individual words hard to make out it did not interfere with my comprehension of the overall meaning of any sentence and as the object of the task was not dependent on high sound quality this was arguably a peripheral issue.

Perhaps the greatest disadvantage was that the recorders were not equipped with speakers. This would have had a serious impact in that they could not evaluate and give each other feedback on their output as to whether it should be repeated or modified. To solve this problem I provided each group with a pair of earphones so that two could listen to the recording at a time. This led to some delays as they were passed around from pair to pair. This was the most serious deficiency in the class overall I feel. The lack of a product for them to listen to as a group limited the mutual satisfaction they derived from completing the tasks. This weakened the development of group cohesion by depriving them of an amount of the feeling of "successful completion of whole group tasks" listed as factor aiding the development of such spirit in Dörnyei (1997: p486). Despite these drawbacks, the response of the students to the recorders was at first as I had hoped, with a lot more of the interaction within the groups directed toward the recording and extracting a greater amount of spoken English.

The tasks were chosen on the basis that they could be performed, based on the students' own knowledge and

creativity; without the need for extensive research or materials.

The first task involved making a radio advertisement for their school.

The second task was to make a documentary about any serious issue they chose. The most popular being the environment.The third task was one based on an incident where a man had been led off a train at the local railway station by a group of plain clothes police officers or gangsters. They had to re-enact this incident based on their interpretation of its cause, its aftermath and then give a news style report about it. This turned into a rather rumbunctious activity.

It was at this stage I decided to alter the composition of the groups. This was done in the following way; I informed the students that there was to be a new group formed, named 'Group Platinum' after the colour of the remaining recorder (which was actually grey). This group was especially for those who had not had a chance to participate as much as the others. I initially said any one who felt they fit this description could volunteer. If there were no volunteers I said they could discuss and decide within the group. If this failed to produce a candidate I said I would select the person myself. There was some hesitation even resistance to this proposal as a few students felt that to volunteer might draw attention to their weaker position and loss of face. Both the first two stages of the process were undertaken however reluctantly, but the group discussion option produced far fewer than the other stages. Some students refused even when nominated.

When one platinum group had been composed in each class, the recording cycle was restarted.

The fourth task was one where they would have to record a report dealing with some aspect of the Japanese educational system.

The fifth task was a report about some aspects of life in Japan.

The sixth was a report on young people's lives compared to those of young people forty years ago.

The seventh and final task was one where they were given a ghost story written in Japanese and each student was allowed twenty-five minutes to write out a translation. Then when the time was up their translation was taken in for marking. Then their group had to record an oral version of the story from memory within twenty minutes.

For each of these tasks it was stressed that they could practise and record and erase as many times as they liked until they were satisfied with the final version. They were also told that not only content but also aspects of their delivery such as, pronunciation, and intonation were important. Finally the students were instructed that each recording had to be made without using the pause button. This last stipulation was aimed at keeping their production in real time conditions.

In the earlier tasks I would introduce and describe the task in the latter half of one class, give them a chance to ask questions, discuss it, assign roles among themselves and to get started preparing for it by looking up vocabulary or starting to write a script. A week later in the next class I would distribute the recorders to the groups and let them commence. I did the work over this time scale to give them enough time complete the work to their own satisfaction as they got used to the devices and the process of recording. Unfortunately a great many students did not use the time available to them and delayed their completion of the written part of the task until just before the assignments were to be handed in, and then made just a cursory effort at recording. This prevented other students from rehearsing, practising their pronunciation and making and remaking the recordings as much as they wanted to.

In the latter half of the course I compressed the time available until the whole process would have to be completed within one class period. This gave them less time to squander and perhaps led to more justifiable and probably more natural and beneficial ad-libbing and recasting on their part. However to answer the problem of loafing students I re-introduced a compulsory written element where the students had twenty-five minutes to compose what they wanted to say. Whether in point form, Japanese, or full script. I like to let the students write out and compose what they want to say for many reasons among which are according to Townsend and Fu (1998, p.16), "Writing before and after class discussions may clarify important issues and give students courage to speak out. Writing gives students a chance to articulate ideas that might otherwise remain vague."

When the twenty-five minutes were up I would circulate and stamp all worksheets that showed signs of effort these would then be assigned bonus points after all sheets were collected at the end of the class. This was designed to reward good use of time and effort and to try to focus them on concentrated oral production. I then handed out the recorders for the last twenty minutes of the class. After introducing and demonstrating the task the only condition I would stipulate was that the final recording should be ideally one of at least one minute and less than three minutes. I said that while exceeding the limit would incur no penalty, falling short would. I also stipulated that as far as possible each person in the group must feature in the recording as equally as circumstances allowed. The end-of-period bell was the sign for the recorders to be handed in. The recordings were then transferred to a computer and examined to determine the extent of each member's production.

The total time when recording seemed to be being actively attempted was measured in seconds. Next the least integrated seeming students' recording time was identified by voice and calculated as a percentage of the total. After these students entered platinum group all of the platinum members' times were then estimated. When it came to assessing the production of the students, I took into account not only the amount of time each spent speaking, but also for how long each had control of the voice recorder. This I felt could be reflective of his assimilation into the group, as someone who is not accepted as an equal by his peers might feel pressure not to take up too much time with the recorder. It also may indicate how confident and relaxed the student felt in his group.

Finally in the last class I asked each group to complete an anonymous survey of their feelings about the course's group work.

Results

Platinum Students Active Participation in Recording
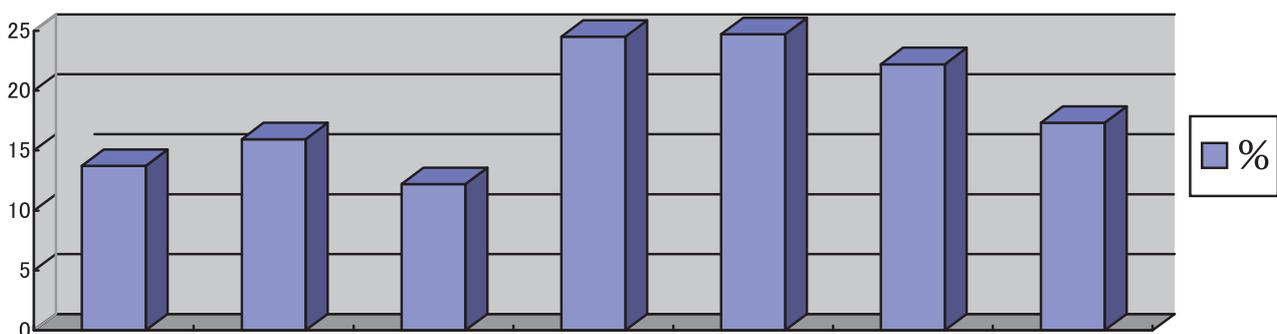
Percentage of Group Speaking Time Taken by Platinum Group Across Tasks

	Recording	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	Name	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
1C	Masahiko	20	19.6	0	22.1	0	17	3.8
	Takuma	16.7	10.6	0	32.1	25.4	21.2	25
	Ken	16	3.9	0	23.6	34.1	21.2	12.5
	Takashi	29.3	8	0	25	38.9	18.2	7
1D	Hirokazu	16.7	21.7	14.8	15.1	17.1	24.3	0
	Kento	15.8	21.3	37.5	29.7	28.6	20.5	97.8
	Tatsuya	16.7	22.2	8	17.8	35.7	25.4	2.2
	Takeshi	0	21.3	25.6	35.7	16.7	18.9	0
1E	Wataru	19.2	11.5	12.5	29.3	25	20.5	12.6
	Syota	0	17.4	29.4	24.4	20.8	30.8	19.1
	Shun	0	9.5	12	19.5	16.7	20.5	13.2
	Teita	14.3	24.2	6.7	19.5	37.5	28.2	14.7
	Total	164.7	191.4	146.4	294.1	296.5	266.8	208
	Average Participation	13.7236	15.95	12.2	24.51	24.7	22.2	17.3297

Discrepancies between group speaking time and the sum of individual speaking times can be attributed to periods when two or more students were speaking at the same time, one made a brief intervention or a student was asking for or rendering aid to another student.

Interpretations

At first glance there seems to have been a marked increase in the average amount of production, with the lowest percentage being registered by 'Incident' which was meant to be a role play. This is largely accounted for by the instructions given to class C being not clear enough, horseplay on the part of some groups, and failure to hand in a recording by one group. Zero was scored in class D in the ghost story, where Kento did 98% of the telling after being nominated by the others to do so and Tatsuya made only a brief interjection.

Takeshi and Masahiko's zeros can generally be accounted for by their having withdrawn and shy personas respectively.

Though on listening to some of the recordings I was surprised at how much and how interesting the work some of the students whom I had felt were most marginalised, (for example Takeshi), had done.

This indicates that many aspects of a student can go unnoticed by the teacher; especially if the student is of a retiring disposition. This is perhaps the corollary of Rambo and Matheson's (2003, p12) observation that the "dysfunctions of the group process were hidden" from the teacher.

The three activities with the highest levels of production, (education, young people, and life in Japan),were the ones that after initial discussion of division of labour, demanded the least teamwork with each student then concentrating on writing his own section of the report. The lower percentages are to be found in the tasks which depended on more collaboration with team mates (commercial, incident and ghost story).

While we also must take into account the fact that any increase in percentage of the output might solely be due to increasing familiarity with making recordings, we must also remember that the reassigned students were working with new partners and were having to once again try to find their own place or role within their new group.

While there had been an improvement in their speed of undertaking the task and quantity of the material oral or written they produced. I have not detected any similar change in the quality of their oral production nor in their awareness of the language. They do however appear more relaxed with Shun swearing to himself as he tried to remember the ghost story and Teita chuckling to himself ironically.

End of Course Group Work Survey

	2nd	3rd
1 Which was more enjoyable the 2nd or 3rd term's group work?	5	6
2. Which did you work harder in the 2nd or 3rd term's group work?	1	10
3. Which had better team work the 2nd or 3rd term's group work?	6	5
4. Which recordings were better the 2nd or 3rd term's?	4	7

The results of the end of course survey while generally tending to show more satisfaction with the third term's work, show that a slight majority found the team work in their old group was superior. Again for general enjoyableness the third term was favoured by only a small margin; perhaps this is connected to their answer to question two where almost all felt that they had had to do more.

I included a small space for the students to comment freely, in their L1 or English on the group work. Most expressed satisfaction, however one respondent expressed strong displeasure at being 'forced' into platinum.

One factor that cannot be discounted is the progression of the school year towards its final examinations and assessment's influence on student production. Several students, for example Tatsuya, were put on notice by their homeroom teachers that they would be kept back a year if their grades did not improve. While this kind of background may not vitiate the research entirely it does have a great influence on student performance.

I also find that the range of tasks provided were not carefully thought about enough with a view to providing uniform data. It would perhaps have been better to order the tasks according to how much cooperation or extroversion they demanded.

Summary and Conclusions

Noticing that some students in my high school classes seemed to be estranged from their groups and consequently did not contribute or gain as much from group work as their peers. I decided to see if whether removing them from these groups and placing them in a group of students with similar group profiles would lead to any increase in their oral production I embarked on a course of tasks aimed at creating audio recordings that might provide evidence of any change in the level of oral production elicited from these students.

My next step was to initiate my study by gathering audio data from several classes of existing groups among whose members there were students who seemed unassimilated. I then

moved these students to a new group (platinum) and continued to record their output.

The data shows a definite increase in their contributions however several factors mitigate against this being completely reliable data. Firstly there was a large amount of task difference, then increasing fluency in the use of the recorders and accustomisation to the recording cycle increased productivity anyway, and finally student consciousness of the need to perform academically was raised by out of class forces.

Based on literature written on this area that I was able to find, it is clear that personal relationships and identity are recognised as important factors in language acquisition affecting learners working in groups and that group dynamics is a rich and vibrant field of linguistic study. The consensus among researchers seems to be that people can not be just expected to work together they have to be taught how to through social and cooperative skill building activities.

Reflections

In my efforts at research I focussed primarily on accumulating a large mass of data via audio recordings from ten classes and fifty groups. I carefully sorted and filed them according to class and group. When I eventually came to analyse them I found I had accumulated over fourteen hours of recordings I embarked on their analysis and found that between work and family I did not have nearly enough time to get through it all. I then had to reduce the scope of my research to just the three classes that had provided the most consistent data and spread of student ability. I have learned as a researcher not to bite off more than I can chew and to think through the process keeping in mind the more practical issues that might arise along the way.

I have also come to realise the difficulty of achieving laboratory like conditions to produce reliable data vis a vis language acquisition. The everyday bedlam of a class of teenage boys does not readily lend itself to cool observation. Impressions (which are frequently misleading) have to be taken on the fly. Perhaps this merely reflects the true nature of our work, where we work with myriad personalities in infinite combinations; some happy, and some not.

Appendix : End of Year Survey

Class_____   Group_____

1. Which was more enjoyable

   the 2nd or 3rd term's group work?   Answer_____

2. Which did you work harder in

   the 2nd or 3rd term's group work?   Answer_____

3. Which had better team work

   the 2nd or 3rd term's group work?   Answer_____

4. Which recordings were better

   the 2nd or 3rd term's?   Answer_____

Comments on group work: English or 日本語。

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