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SPECIFICITY OF PAIR/GROUP WORK IN TEACHING ENGLISH TO THE MULTICULTURAL CLASSROOM

Yolanda Mirela Catelly

Assoc. Prof., Politehnica University of Bucharest

Abstract: In the academic landscape of our current period there are quite numerous cases of multicultural learner groups. This has been caused by a variety of reasons, from an increased access of students to mobility internationally, through a general tendency towards globalization of the workforce, with the family/parents relocating abroad, and up to the migration waves of recent times. Consequently, university teachers have to adjust teaching approaches to the multicultural structure of their classrooms, as the case goes with the educational context described in this paper, viz. a tertiary education technical university in Romania, which has a faculty of engineering in foreign languages with English, French or German as the languages of tuition in the three streams. As the foreign language teachers to the multicultural groups of students specific to this faculty have to address this issue in the most efficient manner while fostering the quality of the learners' instructional process in a positive climate, it is necessary that best practices in this respect should be identified and developed. Therefore, the paper aim is to discuss the specific features of organizing classroom management at the level of pair/group work in such multicultural groups, in order to ensure the best training conditions for the participants. The main principles underlying the proposed approach to organizing pair/group work are presented, as well as the data obtained by means of a Student Questionnaire and classroom observation on the topic of students' views connected to working in pairs/groups in the multicultural classroom. Such surveys are useful not only as they provide the teachers with valuable feedback necessary to adjust their approach to the class management issue of organizing pair/group work, but it is at the same time an activity which can implicitly raise the students' awareness about the positive aspects, as well as about the possible drawbacks of working in pairs/groups with colleagues from other countries/cultures.

Keywords: multicultural classroom, pair/group work, class management, awareness raising task, English as a foreign language

I. Introduction – paper aim

The contexts within which foreign language learning takes place at present has changed considerably from many points of view, among which one is the structure of student groups, that no longer comprise learners belonging to one country/culture only. In numerous tertiary education institutions the presence of students coming from a great many countries/cultures of the world has added new features to the classroom mosaic of identities. This aspect has also consequences upon the approach to teaching used by the instructors who are thus faced with a new different profile of the educational settings.

A good preamble to this paper can be found in an address by Sir Harold Walker (2008), who remarked that the new structure of multicultural groups in universities could help us all 'to lift our eyes from our own work and view the wider world'. It is emphasized that the new

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opportunities created for students, of interacting with fellow trainees from other cultural backgrounds, could be an enriching experience, 'an added value' that their teachers can foster.

It is a manner of providing the future graduates with support in developing appropriate attitudes and specific skills which could be of invaluable use later on to them, in their professional environments, that have become multicultural to a great extent nowadays.

The paper aim is therefore that of analyzing some aspects concerning multicultural classroom management, with a focus on pair and small group work, comparing views and approaches, and identifying best practices and manners of applying them to different educational settings, in function of the specific components of each particular context.

The common denominator of such approaches, in order to make them productive, i.e. able to develop a positive attitude with the students, is that of *fostering tolerance* and *understanding of diversity* by each member of a community of the multicultural type – and the classroom is, for a good period of their study activity, such an environment.

II. Pair/small group work in multicultural contexts – theoretical background

Pair and small group work have been under attention of teachers, foreign language ones including, for quite long. However, it is not our purpose here to analyze in depth the specific features of this type of classroom organization – therefore only those aspects of interest for the association with the topic of the way multicultural group dynamic works are selectively presented and critically discussed, with a view to enhancing efficiency and quality of the manner in which meaning and teaching input are provided in such an educational context.

As already mentioned, working in pairs/small groups in the classroom, that is in *artificial conditions* to a great extent, anticipates many of the communication patterns encountered by the trainees later in their working activity in multicultural environments. Therefore, various views identified in the rich literature on the topic of organizing pair/group work, their possible advantages and disadvantages and so on, will be critically reviewed, but only to the extent they cover new interesting elements as far as *multicultural groups of students* are concerned.

Among the aspects that are of interest in such types of environments, the most important ones refer to the *manner* of organizing pairs/small groups, the way the *teacher acts*, carrying out classroom management while the students work in such pairs/groups, the selection of *appropriate task types* - in relationship with the lesson objectives and the group profile, and that lend themselves naturally to pair/group work, the amount of *teacher support* in encouraging the learners to express their own view/opinions, at what moment of the lesson and how etc. Similarly, a discussion of the *advantages* versus *disadvantages* of pair/small group work, with examples of good practice from the literature and our own experience, is provided.

That pair work is essential in the *communicative* approach to teaching a language is almost a trite remark. Some authors (Hill, 2004) even consider it the 'staple of the communicative classroom', as it is the best way of ensuring practice opportunities to the students, aiming to develop both accuracy and fluency. Moreover, we should add that it is also a good manner of increasing the learners' *awareness of diversity* in multicultural environments of study and/or work.

From the various lists of *benefits* of working in pairs/small groups to be found in the literature, here are several that are focused particularly on the possibilities provided by the *multicultural group* (Bertrand, 2010):

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- it encourages students to 'mix with everyone in the group', thus providing the trainees with opportunities to enlarge perspective and get to know people belonging to different cultures,
- it trains students in acting in a multicultural environment, fostering their openness to new/different viewpoints,
- it gives the learners a 'sense of achievement', particularly valuable within the multicultural small teams, in which they have to adjust behaviour – and sometimes even to 'round off the corners' throughout the process.

Benefits of pair/group work are multiple, both for the students and for the teacher (BusyTeacher.org, 2016). Trainees help each other – or challenge each other, and somewhere during the process they have a chance to 'grow closer to each other'.

In multicultural settings, to the above a development of one's 'cultural sensitivity' could be added: people in such groups find out about peers from a great many places all over the world, with different 'values, expectations and beliefs'. This can only happen, we would like to stress, if the teacher provides appropriate opportunities for such exchanges to take place, by the manner in which they organize pair/group work.

Equally, the teacher can get *feedback* from the manner in which such forms of classroom activity organization are successful or not, and operate the right adjustments in order to give the learners the opportunity to assert their personality and perform authentically.

The teacher can thus become aware of any possible stumbling blocks and deal with them in such a manner as to avoid reaching the point of critical incidents. The instructor's mission is, therefore, to help the students to be able to accept and appreciate peers – this will mean there are high chances that they will do the same in the case of the people they will have to work with.

As shown in the literature (Race, 2006), the type of pair/group selection and organization, whether they are 'rounds, buzz groups, brainstorming' and so on, or a mixture of all, applied throughout the academic year, they will all contribute to preparing the students for similar *skills* necessary later in employment, such as: team work, cope with the unavoidable difficulties in any interaction between people, develop sympathetic and/or critical listening etc.

It is important, therefore, that the teacher harnesses the multicultural group *diversity* from the very beginning (Rollin, 2008). The range of 'different views, needs, expectations and values' in the multicultural group, 'far from impacting negatively on the learning process...can stimulate debate and enrich' it.

Teaching such a diversity of students is indeed a real *challenge* (Knefelkamp, 1997), as it requires one to respond to the needs of the individuals and of the various groups, while fostering their effective participation in 'a democratic and pluralistic society'.

Diversity can be quite considerable; as early as 1984, Hofstede would point to the differences between the 'developed and modern' countries and the 'traditional and backward' ones. We could comment on this assertion, showing that, with the general trend towards globalization and internationalization, such views should perhaps be somehow remodeled, with consequences upon the treatment of multicultural groups ensured by foreign language teachers - as in the case discussed here.

The multicultural groups of today are already common place, so teachers have to prepare well in order to approach cultural diversity appropriately (Davis, 2013). Today, diversity education specialists can provide expert advice, while empirical classroom research can also add valuable insights to the way this issue is solved in class, in our opinion – which is one

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more reason we have chosen to share these thoughts with fellow teachers in similar contexts. Everybody seems to consider that the pivotal role is played by *communication*, with teachers attempting to work 'equitably' in an efficient manner, being able to:

- 'welcome and engage diverse students',
- make full use of – and even design, resources for developing 'inclusive learning environments',
- approach 'race, gender equality, empathy and bullying prevention during class'.

The interest and concern for enabling teachers to prepare their students for study in multicultural groups has grown lately. There are universities (Carnegie Mellon University, 2015), that provide *guides* to 'teaching in an increasingly multicultural setting'. That means the academia's awareness of this issue and its multiple facets has really increased. It is emphasized that if this is not addressed in due time, it can develop into a problem much more difficult to solve later on. Moreover, solutions should not based on mere assumptions, research is necessary, as well as – we would add – *sharing* views and good practice examples among practitioners in the field.

The danger exists, we have to point to this aspect, that within the multicultural classroom, a teacher who is not aware of the deep cultural dissimilarities among the learners and applies concepts without understanding the inherent differences students belonging to one culture or another, runs the risks to witness cross-cultural critical incidents. These would be much more difficult to disentangle at later stages in the group activity.

In what follows, a series of aspects related to the specific *features of pair/small group work in multicultural groups* are selectively presented and discussed, in order to generate an initial framework of advisable principles for teaching in such environments.

Thus, the very manner in which students are divided into small groups is 'a subtle yet powerful element of spiral learning' (Hofner Saphiere, 2013), as it can:

- contribute to the instauration of a positive atmosphere that fosters learning,
- provide some insights not only in oneself but also in the peers,
- develop team spirit,
- enhance learning about similarities and differences among peers from various cultures.

Moreover, as pointed out in the literature on pair work in multicultural groups (Haines, 1995), it is natural that when communication in pairs/small groups is organized in the multicultural groups, members of each pair/groups should have a mother tongue that is indeed different from the one studied in that group. It would be indeed 'artificial' to 'speak a second language to someone who shares your first language'. Furthermore, there is also the risk that in such settings, if several students from the same culture work together as members of a group, the activity may 'end up as dominated by one culture' (Race, 2006).

There are strong connections between the following elements: allocation process – group work – affective issues – good performance in a multicultural educational environment (Kelly, 2008). On the negative side, there are voices who maintain that there are risks that some students may dislike group work inherently, hence conflicts could emerge, blocking communication and implicitly learning success.

Research on *allocation* of tertiary students for group work (Mantzioris, 2014) shows that there does not seem to be a direct connection between the type of allocation (by means of procedures such as: student selection, academic selection, random selection etc.), and its outcomes in terms of learning efficiency, respectively. We would venture to maintain that this can also be true for pair/small group selection, as well, therefore we would emphasize on the

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need to have variety in terms of the procedures of selection, with the obvious hidden agenda intention of ensuring both variety of culture and nonrepetitiveness.

A similar concern for the kind of changes to be carried out in the teacher's approach to managing a multicultural group can be found in recent literature (Iļjina and Rēzeknes, 2014). They refer to the need of adjusting teaching techniques and management skills in general, in the context of *cultural diversity* at tertiary level, which is considered 'crucial' in organizing 'effective' teaching and learning in the multicultural language classroom.

If such adjustments do not take place *permanently* throughout the common work, then, as warned in the literature (Stahl et al., 2009), then 'process losses through task conflict and decreased social integration' will occur and, implicitly, 'process gains' such as creativity increase and general satisfaction will tend to decrease.

III. Back to the multicultural classroom – proposed approach synoptic presentation

In what follows, a brief presentation of the educational context taken into consideration is presented, as well as the main lines of action generated in order to ensure the effectiveness of pair/small group work in multicultural groups of students.

The setting is that of the Faculty of Engineering in Foreign Languages - FILS of the Bucharest Polytechnic, the English stream, at both bachelor and master levels. The *profile* of FILS student groups is characterized by the presence of learners belonging to at least two cultures – Romanian and at least one foreign culture, although in general one can teach groups comprising students coming from up to ten different countries/cultures from all over the world.

Multicultural groups are offered practical courses of *English for Professional Communication - EPC* and *English for Science and Technology - EST*, as well as ESP and/or CLIL type of courses, such as: *English for Engineering Academic Study – EEAS*, and *Scientific and Technical Communication in English – STCE*.

The FILS students are aged 18-25, with at least level B2/CEFR English language proficiency. English is generally a foreign language for them, with few exceptions, while their knowledge of Romanian is basic – at least at the beginning of their bachelor level years.

In terms of *attitude towards diversity*, the majority of the learners has, or at least displays, an open attitude, but this does not necessarily means that the instructional process cannot be hindered by possible critical moments related to one or another aspect rooted in the individual student profile as regards their culture/opinions/beliefs/attitudes/perceptions etc.

The approach to organizing pair/small group work in such multicultural groups raises to the teacher even more problems in order to anticipate - and avoid escalation of, than the case is with monocultural groups. Moreover, as group structure is *never identical* for all groups/years/levels/generations, then permanent teacher attention is required to adjust general principles to the specific features of each particular group.

Concretely, there are several rules that should be always applied, viz. that of getting students from at least two different cultures to work in a group, in order to avoid the tendency to use L1, whichever that language is. Moreover, this type of pair/group structure will also contribute to teaching the students how to *negotiate* with people from other cultures, by activating the appropriate set of skills that are useful in order to have success – an action that prepares them for their employment similar requirements.

As far as the possible combinations of students in pair/small group work, a basic principle is to *avoid monotony* in the manner of allocation. That is why a wide range of techniques are

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used, at least at the first stages of the activity – as later on the students will have internalized the principles and they will naturally choose to sit next to colleagues from a different culture and form pairs/small groups with them.

Moreover, the teacher makes it clear to the students that the intention is to have *diversity* inside the working groups; sometimes, a *discussion* on the advantages and disadvantages of the approach is organized, in order to raise the students' awareness of the importance of developing the right attitude towards diversity.

The treatment of the students in each pair/small group is one based on equal chances, of encouraging all to participate. For fine tuning actions, meant to enhance the smooth activity in pairs/groups, students are given an opportunity to present aspects (connected with the topic under discussion in class) specific to their own culture, for instance most important celebrations over the year. It is seen as an opportunity for all the participants to broaden horizons, thus getting to understand their peers better.

As the manner in which students are organized in pairs/groups might unwillingly lead to possible false assumptions or misunderstandings, the teacher asks the students if they feel comfortable in those pairs/groups. Such an approach can ensure avoidance of further friction or even conflicts. If there are cases when the students display reluctance, then the reasons are discussed openly and a solution is looked for.

It is important to mention that, although there are several such general rules that can be applied, particularly at the beginning of the activity with multicultural groups, two aspects should also be mentioned as equally important for the teacher's approach, viz. (i) with any group, one can talk about a certain *group dynamic*, i.e. in time, the learners will have internalized attitudes and rules of behaviour, will have even developed possible affective links with peers, conducive to a change of perspective, in favour of enlarging their openness to diversity; (ii) as each group, multicultural or not, is in itself a unique entity, the teacher should grow aware of the group profile *subtle* features and take them into account permanently, by adjusting nuances of their pair/group work management accordingly.

This is also true not only for the initial allocation of students in pairs/groups, but also for the manner in which the teacher monitors the students' activity in those working structures. If there are potential risk issues, then these should be discussed immediately after the task at hand is over.

Moreover, one good manner of improving the quality of pair and especially small group work is that of assigning the role of *Observer* to one student, whose task should be to note down and report to the class on the manner in which activity in a certain group has taken place.

In a similar manner, *Student diaries* can have rubrics asking them to describe the way in which they have collaborated in pair/group work, which can make them reflect on their own attitude and that of the peers, and try to identify the critical points.

A *Student Questionnaire* addressed to the learners in the FILS multicultural groups also provided useful insights as to the feelings of each student towards their peers from other cultures. Responses pointed to an open attitude, which seems to have been fostered by the type of work in groups in the classroom. However, it is interesting to note that, when asked if they maintain the same friendly relationships with their group mates outside the university, almost 80% admitted that they do not, apart from several cases (under 5%, though), where common hobbies or interests, such as playing the same sports, have determined them to spend time with colleagues belonging to another culture.

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There are *tasks* that are lend themselves well for pair/small group work, but that are also suitable as they give learners the possibility to understand diversity of opinions/beliefs etc. better. Here are some examples from our context.

One such *cultural differences awareness raising task* is that of discussing *critical incidents across cultures*. Students are asked to work together and remember such incidents that could have happened to them or to people they know, to describe the incident and to try to explain what went wrong and what the causes might have been for it. It is a good opportunity for each of the peers to reflect on their own experience, find out about similar situations, and finally to identify the causes of such situations.

When culture related *topics* are discussed in class, one productive task is that of presenting the differences between the English culture and the culture of each participant, first as group discussion and then as a report to the whole class about the findings. A good example of such an activity is that of discussing the significance of gestures and/or body language in general in a certain culture – in the setting described here it was frequently a diverting one, but at the same time a useful one for its capacity of stimulating reflection on diversity and tolerance.

Feedback from all these types of activities is always a valuable tool for the teacher in getting to know each group's profile, in an attempt to adjust the approach to its specific features.

IV. Concluding remarks

The approach proposed in this paper has a range of permanent specific features, such as the need for the teacher to adopt and promote the right classroom management style meant to enhance the quality of the learning taking place, with pair/small group work under focus.

Awareness raising tasks are important in order to foster the learners' better understanding of concepts and developing appropriate attitudes in the classroom. It is a formative type of action for both the students and the teacher, meant to turn the classroom into a positive pleasant environment, with everybody comfortable with the peers and with a high quality type of learning going on.

At the same time, such an environment will have a definite role in preparing the learners for the kind of activity they will have as employees working for multicultural organizations. It is therefore both challenging for the teacher to identify best means of fostering the students' evolution in this respect, and rewarding at the same time to pursue such exploration work.

To conclude, we agree with the idea stated in the literature (Grenfell and Erler, 2007) that it is extremely important that in our teaching activity we should concentrate a bit less perhaps on the product and 'more on the process'.

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