

STUDENTS' PERCEPTION ON LEADERSHIP SKILLS VIA GROUP WORK IN AN ESL CLASSROOM IN HIGHER LEARNING INSTITUTION

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Abstract-Leadership skills could be developed and enhanced through group work in an ESL classroom. Working in groups enables students to develop and apply their leadership skills in managing their group members. It is important for English Language Instructors to provide the opportunity for students in the ESL classroom to not only be able to communicate interactively in English among their group members but also able to learn the skills in managing the group. Thus, this study aims to investigate the students' perception on leadership while working in groups. A qualitative approach that utilises a semi structured interview was conducted on 45 participants from 6 different classes. The findings of this study revealed three main areas that the participants perceived influences their leadership skills when working in groups. The two main areas are 1) the challenges that they face when managing a group and 2) the solutions that they took to overcome the challenges. The findings of this study are useful not only to English language instructors but also to students in order to have a better understanding on

the issues that were faced by the students in managing a group in an ESL classroom in Higher Learning Institution.

Keywords: *ESL classroom, Group work, Leadership, Higher Learning Institution*

Introduction

Group work is considered one of the pedagogical strategies that is implemented in a teaching and learning classroom in order to instil and develop leadership skills as well as co-operation among students (Usman, 2015). Being able to work in groups, students can function more effectively and efficiently when members are assigned specific roles such as group leader, researcher, moderator among others. Assigning roles in a group could help trigger specific socio-cognitive processes. For example, students are exposed to problem solving tasks which requires them to apply deductive and critical thinking in order to solve the problem.

For the purpose of this study, this paper focuses on the perception of the students who were assigned the role as a group leader, the challenges they face and the solution that they took in order to overcome the difficulties they face by being a group leader.

The main objectives of the study are to;

1. Identify the challenges that are faced in being a group leader
2. Investigate the solutions to overcome the challenges as a group leader

The research questions of the study are;

1. What are the challenges that are faced by a group leader?
2. What are the solutions that are taken by a group leader in order to overcome the challenges?

Literature Review

According to Brown (2001) group work is a multiplicity of techniques in which two or more students are assigned a task that involves collaboration and self-initiated language. Generally, there are 3 types of group work which are informal group, formal group as well as study teams (Johnson & Johnson, 2008). Informal group would be clustering students in a single class session and completing simpler and short task whilst formal group would be to complete a specific task such as preparing for a presentation or carrying out a project. Study teams on the other hand would simply be informing their group members about lectures or assignments that they missed.

For group size, it is common that teachers would assign three to four people in a group. The number of people in a group would depend on the task that is needed to be accomplished. (Richards, 1985). Having too many group members in a group would result to having passengers and passive members who would not do their part of the work load. Thus, to avoid from such instances from occurring, each group should have a group leader in order to lead and manage the direction of the group to get the task done (Baines et. al, 2009)

In an ESL classroom, the merits of working as group helps to generate interactive language. By working in small groups, students have the opportunities to be less shy and less self-aware which would help them be more comfortable in using the target language. This is in line with

Long and Porter (1985) in Usman (2015) that small group work generates more negotiation of meaning than teacher-fronted activities. This is where the group leader plays his or her role in making sure that there is effective communication among group members to avoid any miscommunication among them. However, it can be argued that miscommunication could still occur if the group members could not get along with each other thus creating a challenge for the group leaders to solve the conflict that occurs between them.

Apart from that, Brown (2011) further mentions that group work embraces affective climate where they would feel secure and not easily be criticized or insulted. This allows students to work together in order to achieve the same goal. Having said that, group leaders bears the responsibility in making sure that the environment of the group is safe and secure for all group members to be able to co-operate with one another. Brown (2011) also adds credit that group work promotes students' responsibility and autonomy which could further develop students' leadership skills which is an important skill and quality that is necessary for students to acquire (Khalil Al-Jammal, 2015).

With regards to leadership, it is important that students are instil with leadership skills that focuses on communication, teamwork, planning, decision making, problem and other skills (Swan, 2011). Swan's (2011) statement is supported by Archard (2013), Middleton (2013) and Peterson and Peterson (2012) that leadership is not something that is heredity but instead it is something that could be nurtured and taught over time. Having acquired these skills would help students in managing their group in order to get a task completed with minimum conflicts among group members. This is supported by Torres (2013) that great leaders are bonded by being able to encourage and empower their followers.

Methodology

A qualitative approach is implemented to discover students' perception in enhancing leadership through group work. 45 participants were involved in the study where the identity of the informants is classified to protect the confidentiality of informants. A semi-structured interview method was used to gather empirical data that coincide with the objectives of the study. A semi-structured interview allows space for the researcher to explore the feedback given by the informants (Creswell, 2014). The transcripts of the audio recordings were then translated into verbatim form where the content was then categorized into themes (Silverman, 2013)

45 informants were involved in the interview session. These informants are first year students who are in their second semester. They hold the role as a group leader in this semester's English Oral Communication class. Each group consist of 5 people in a group and these informants voluntarily choose themselves as the group leader.

Results and Recommendation

To answer the research questions of this study, the instrument used was semi-structured interview. The data of the interview was then transcribed and analysed using thematic coding. This method allows the researcher to obtain comprehensive data where the questions were asked openly on the issues related to the objective of the study. The findings of the interview resulted into two main areas which are 1) challenges faced by a group leader and 2) solutions to overcome the challenges faced.

Challenges Faced by Group Leaders

The findings from the interview revealed that the challenges faced by group leaders could be categorized into 4 main themes which are attitude, communication, internet connection and co-operation among group members as presented below.

Attitude

In the context of this study, attitude refers to the group members' behaviour towards the group leader.

Table 1. Challenges: Attitude among group members

Attitude among group members	
Informants	Remarks
2	“ I find that my group members are uncooperative, selfish and pathetic”
11	“ Some of the group members are slow in sending their work that i want to combine”
27	“ My group members are very quiet when i give them instructions on what to do”
34	“ One of my group members went missing and don't respond when i text him”
45	“ My team member went absent from the group when we need him to do the group project”
39	“ One of the challenges is my group members do not want to give or share their ideas when doing discussion”
15	“ As a group leader i find it difficult to manage them to send their work on time. That slows down my work”

Table 1 shows the remarks given by the informants when asked about the challenges they faced as group leaders. From the remarks given, it could be seen that the respondents tended to perceive that their group members have attitude problems which has led to difficulties in managing the group. The result of this finding is in line with Brown (2011) who stated that group work could lead to difficulty in controlling as well as monitoring all group members.

Communication

In the context of this study, communication refers to the effective interaction between the group leaders and their group members where both parties understand each other without misunderstanding.

Table 2. Challenges: Communication among group members

Communication among group members	
Informants	Remarks
13	“Sometimes miscommunication occurs among group members which leads to disagreement”
30	“Miscommunication happens quite frequently in my group”
29	“My group members didnt pay attention in class. They take for granted that group leader will inform in the group”
5	“ My group members and i have miscommunication with each other and that is hard”
6	“When doing group discussion, it is difficult to make conclusion because everyone has different opinion and do not want to accept other opinion.”
7	“My group members do not want to communicate with one another”

Table 2 shows another challenge faced by groups leaders which was communication among group members. The remarks given by the informant above clearly indicate that miscommunication appears in most of the groups which made it difficult for the group leaders to get their work done. Informant 6 indicated that one of the reasons that causes miscommunication was because the group members are very opinionated.

Internet Connection

In the context of this study, internet connection would refer to the ability to connect the internet, without any interruption by using computer terminals and/or other devices to access services from the World Wide Web (WWW).

Table 3. Challenges: Internet Connection problem

Internet connection problem	
Informants	Remarks
33	“ There were some group members that have internet connection problem so it was hard”
36	“ Internet connection problems makes it difficult to get things done”
43	“ Having low internet connection when doing online discussion is really difficult for me as a group leader”
7	“ Internet connection is the issue in my group which makes it hard to do the work given”
22	“Most of my teammates have internet problem so I find it hard to do group discussion”

Table 3 above shows that the informants unanimously agree that having internet connection problems hinders them to carry out their task especial when conducting a group discussion. When this situation occurs, it hinders and slows down the group leaders in completing the task at hand. Classes for this semester were conducted online which requires students to have good internet access as well as enough data to gain access to the internet. The inability to meet the requirements may result to students having difficulty in not only completing the task given but also being present in class.

Co-operation

Co-operation in this context of study refers to the action or process of working together in order to achieve the same goal at the end.

Table 4. Challenges: Co-operation among group members

Communication among group members	
Informants	Remarks
31	“ Sometimes, my group members do not give the co-operation that i want, that makes it difficult to complete the task given by the lecturer”
22	“ My teammates do not give co-operation when doing project work”
5	“ My group members have difficulty in giving their co-operation”
9	“Some of my group members are my friend, but they would not give their co-operation in doing the project.”

Table 4 above shows that the informants perceive that their group members were not giving their co-operation as they are supposed to. This occurrence in the group could result to the task given not being completed on time. It is interesting to note that informant 9 mentioned that even though the group members are his or her friend, it is not a guarantee that they would give their full co-operation.

Solutions to overcome the challenges

The findings obtained from the interview session discovered that there are several solutions that was taken by group leaders in overcoming the challenges that they faced earlier on. The solutions that were taken by the group leaders could be divided into 2 main areas which are communication and attitude.

Communication

As stated above, communication refers to the effective and efficient interaction between the both parties who are the group leaders and their group members.

Table 5. Solution: Having better communication skills

Having better communication skills	
Informants	Remarks
6	“ I should explain clearly and respectfully to ensure that everyone in my group understand the task”
17	“ Always be in contact with my group members and remind them of the task they we need to complete as a group”
38	“ I always remind my group members about the assesments”
35	“ I would contact the group member directly to avoid misunderstanding”

Table 5 above indicates that group leaders unanimously agree that being a group leader, they must have good communication skills in order to avoid misunderstanding and miscommunication with the others. The explanation that they give to the group members should be clear and organized.

Attitude

Attitude in this context of the study refers to the behaviour and action of the group leaders in order to portray an exemplary attitude to their group members. The informants tend to believe that by doing so, their group members would follow suit.

Table 6: Portray a good attitude to group members

Potray good attitude	
Informants	Remarks
31	“ I try to be firm to my group members and directly confront them their mistakes”
41	“ I directly say to my teammates to pay attention in class and don’t just wait for the group leaders to take down notes when the lecturer is teaching in class”
4	“ I need to organize myslef carefully first so i could focus on the group”
3	“ I would help my group members who need help and ask the to be more alert during class”
15	“ I would them personally and ask if there is any problem. I would also encourage them to talk even though they know they dont’ have good English.
23	“ I need to be more positive in facing the provlems that i face”
42	“I need to practice more patience and tolarance with my group members”

Table 6 above shows that the informants tend to perceive that a good leader should lead by example. Informants 3 and 15 both used the personal touch approach which was to help their group members if they have any problems. Some of the informants and group members were staying in campus thus it would be easier for the group leaders to meet up with their group members if needed.

Conclusion

Being a group leader is not as easy as it seems. There are a lot of challenges that are faced by group leaders in managing their groups. Based on the findings that were gathered it was noted that the challenges that were faced by the group leaders could be categorized into four main themes which are attitude, communication, co-operation and internet connection.

In terms of attitude, group leaders face challenges in dealing with their group members attitude which was passive, shy and very opinionated. Lack of communication among group members also leads to group leaders having difficulty in completing the task given due to miscommunication that occurs among group members. Lack of co-operation by group members by handing their work late makes it difficult for group leader to compile all their work to be submitted to the lecturers. With the current pandemic situation that occurs, classes are conducted online. Due to this, group leaders have difficulties with group members who faces low internet connection due the locality of their hometown which may have resulted to unsuccessful group discussion among them.

The findings of this study, discovered that group leader have come up with solutions that could help them in managing their group members better. The result of the findings discovered that the solutions taken by the group leaders to overcome the challenges could be divided into 2 main themes which are 1) having better communication skills and 2) portray a good attitude to group members.

Having better communication skills would mean that group leaders need to be able to communicate clearly and respectfully to their group members to avoid misunderstanding. Apart from that group leaders should be in contact with the group members constantly and remind that of the task at hand so the task could be completed on time.

Portraying a good attitude is another solution that was mentioned by the informants. Being a good leader would mean to be an exemplary model to the group members. For example, having more tolerance and patience towards the group members as well as being positive when facing difficulties in the group.

In conclusion, group work is a good social pedagogy that is implemented by educators in order to instil and develop leadership amongst students.

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