



Virginia Adult Education Research Network

Practitioner Research Briefs, 1999-2000 Report Series

Creative Chaos: What Happens When the Teacher's Not Looking

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Background

I teach beginner-level English as a Second Language (ESL) to immigrant students at the Arlington Education and Employment Program. In a teachers' meeting about student learning goals, we decided that beginner-level students should identify short-term goals within a specific topical unit area. The idea was that limiting the scope of possible learning goals would make the goals process more manageable for the teacher and students alike. For example, students should identify a learning goal related to health while we are discussing health such as "I want to practice listening to instructions so that I can understand the doctor." Additionally, we decided that beginner-level students would be most successful in identifying and achieving their goals if they worked in small groups of students with the same or similar goals. The teacher could then support four or five goal groups of five students each, rather than 25 students with 25 different goals. The way I envisioned it, the teacher would offer resources to help students achieve their goals and students would work together to utilize those resources. Ideally, the groups would be self-directed.

As a teacher, I felt I needed to get a better handle on how students interacted in small groups in order to best prepare and support students as they identified and pursued their goals. I thought they would feel overwhelmed by directing their own small groups and that they would need more structure from me to get the learning benefit from the activity. In order to support my beginners as they identified and pursued their goals within a small group, I decided that I first needed to look more closely at what was going on in those small groups.

Inquiry

What happens when beginner-level ESL students work in small groups?

Action

In this research, I wanted to document what I thought was happening in small groups and find out what else happened when I was not looking. By observing and talking to students, I focused specifically on how students interacted to complete assigned tasks when they were working in small groups. I wanted to find out how they directed their own learning.

Data Collection

To more thoroughly address my research question, I decided it was important to consider from a variety of perspectives how small groups work together. To do this, I enlisted the aid of an objective observer. I interviewed students in their native language, and I kept notes of my own observations and reflections on the class.

On February 10, 2000, a colleague observed my class of 24 students. I asked her to focus specifically on the interaction within one group of students during a group activity. In the activity, groups of four students were given a large map of a city block, stickers with the names of buildings (school, bank, bus stop, etc.), cards indicating where each building sticker should be placed on the map, and a list of instructions. After the class, the observer transcribed her notes. She and I then had a recorded conversation about her observations and how they matched or conflicted with my perceptions.

I interviewed 12 students in their native language (Spanish) to get their perspectives regarding group work. Spanish speakers make up about 90 percent of my class. The 12 students

I interviewed were selected at random from varying English proficiency levels. I interviewed students during regularly scheduled mid-session conferences. At the beginning of each interview, I reminded students of the subject of my research and asked them to think about a specific time in class when we worked in groups, like in the map activity. I asked the following questions: When you work in a group, is there usually a leader who makes the decisions and guides the group? What do you do when there is a question or you do not understand something? and What do you do when there is a person in the group who does not or cannot participate?

Finally, I considered students' group work from my perspective. At the beginning of the session in January, I recorded my initial impressions of each student in terms of how he or she might participate in the class. Throughout the 12-week session I periodically made notes of incidents in class that addressed my research. I also looked at lesson plans and group activities to see how my beliefs about group work were manifested in my work. Another key component in considering group work from my perspective was talking to the observer about how she saw the students interacting in class and then comparing her observation to my perceptions.

Findings

From the wide variety of data collected, I uncovered some exciting findings not only about group work but also about my students and my role as their teacher.

Students participate differently in

small groups than I had expected. In a journal where I recorded my initial impression of students, I noted that Gabriela, seemed "...quiet, but attentive." In a conversation with the observer, I added that she "...can sometimes be so passive (and) doesn't want to speak English in front of me." Similarly, I noted that Jefferson, tended to be quiet and very studious. He seemed cautious about practicing English. My initial impression of Mariana was that she was an "...outspoken, strong student (who) volunteered often." If you asked me, I would have said that Mariana would likely be the leader in a small group, and the other two would struggle to participate. In classroom observation notes, however, both the observer and I described the students very differently as they worked in a small group. In reference to the map activity mentioned earlier, I recorded in my notes, "Gabriela reads blue cards leaning into the map. Jefferson picks up directions again and speaks, motioning to Mariana, who is turned around looking at other tables of learners." Furthermore, the observer later commented that Mariana got distracted easily and did not participate, while Gabriela played a real leadership role. I was surprised and delighted to learn that students who seem passive in a whole class setting are confident and participate as leaders in a small group.

Students organize their work and assign roles even when roles are not identified. Not only did Gabriela take a leadership role in the map activity, she also engaged Jefferson and the two of them acted as co-leaders of the group. In other small groups doing the same activity, I noticed that students would assume

roles — a leader, a cardholder, and a reader, for example. During another class, I asked students to practice a dialog with a partner using clothing vocabulary words. As I was circulating around the room I noticed one group of four students working together and was curious about what they were doing. I approached the table and one student, Mohammed, looked up and said, "pronunciation." In turn, each of the four repeated the new words used in the dialog, and his or her peers gave feedback on the pronunciation ("good" or "no good"). Mohammed acted as facilitator of this activity and the others rotated between the roles of speaker and cheerleader.

One reason I often assign roles is to insure that everyone has the opportunity to participate and so that no one student monopolizes the activity. Looking back on my lesson plans and materials for both of these activities, it is interesting to notice that I did not assign or even define roles. However, in interviews with students about how they work together in groups, I did not get any sense of a need for defined roles. One student told me, "We all participate equally." Beginner-level students with very limited English skills organized and distributed work even when they were not directed to do so.

Students do not always do what I expect, but they get their work done. As with the group that decided to practice pronunciation before beginning the dialog activity, I found that students did not always participate in group work or perform the task as I had anticipated in my planning. In the map activity, for example, the instruction sheet

included a procedure to complete the task. The first item was to write the name of the town students were creating. One group of students was particularly successful in following my oral instruction for preparing the map (identifying all of the pieces necessary for the activity, organizing the cards, etc.) One part of the preparation that they did not do, however, was to give their town a name. I pointed to the blank space where they were to write the name and asked, "name?" My initial impression was that they did not understand the instructions. One of the students in the group, Fatima, responded, "We name it after." The group had decided to name the town after they created the map. In the end, this group did create a beautiful town and named it "Casablanca." What was interesting to me is that they were confident enough in their understanding of the task that they were able to alter the steps but still achieve the same result.

I often worry about my two lowest students, Rosario and Federico and their ability to participate fully in small group activities. One evening, students were practicing a dialog about making a doctor's appointment. Rosario and Federico

isolated themselves and I noticed they were looking at the picture dictionary rather than the dialog text. When I approached, Rosario said, "Colors.... me know." Federico smiled and nodded in agreement. They were looking at the names of colors in English and drilling each other. I said, "good... good," then gently directed their attention to the "parts of the body" page. Rosario looked at the page, recognized the topic area and said, "Tambien (also)." When I walked away, they were practicing naming the parts of the body. By the end of the class, they had begun to practice the dialog together. Rosario and Federico did not do the activity as I had envisioned, but they were able to identify what they needed to focus on and, in the end, achieve the task.

Implications

I am a firm believer in using small groups in the ESL classroom. However, I began this project because I was not confident that beginner-level students would benefit from working in small groups when they needed to be self-directed and achieve a specific task. What I found is that they can and do function very well in self-directed groups. My

beginner students worked successfully in groups even when they received minimal instruction on how to participate. As we see with Gabriela, Jose, Mariana, and Rosario, they organized the work. They assumed participation roles and they even identified areas in which they need extra practice. Additionally, they stayed on task when engaged and in control of their own learning.

I also learned a lot about my role as the teacher when students are working in self-directed groups. My students did not seem to need a lot of structure and explicit support from me during the activities. They were comfortable figuring things out for themselves, adapting, and refocusing activities. They did not need me to guide how they participated in groups. I provided resources, tools, and opportunities for my students and encouraged them to take risks in English. Together we created the learning environment.

Finally I learned that there is a lot going on in my class that I do not and maybe cannot know about. As a teacher, I have to be comfortable with a certain level of creative chaos in which students work together to forge their identities as English speakers and struggle for fluency. □

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