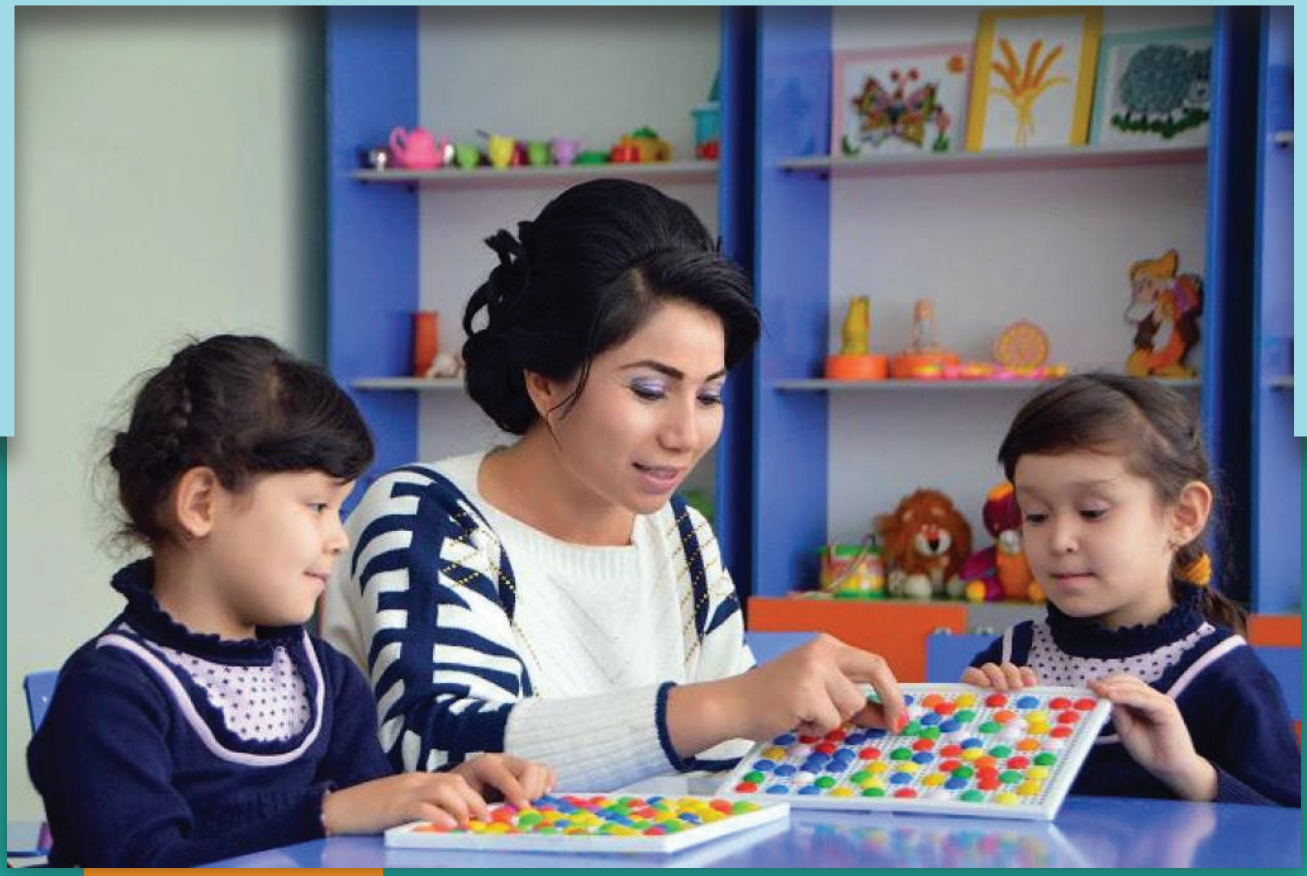
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MAKTABGAÇA VA MAKTAB TA'LİMİ

Pedagogika, psixologiya fanlariga ixtisoslaşgan ilmiy jurnal

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THE IMPACT OF GROUP DISCUSSION ON DEVELOPING STUDENTS' SPEAKING SKILLS IN EFL CONTEXT

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Abstract: This article examines the role of group discussion in developing the speaking skills of students who learn English as a foreign language (EFL). The study is based on practical classes conducted over one month with university students majoring in international relations. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were combined in the research. The findings show that group discussion encourages learners not only to speak but also to listen attentively to their peers and respond to them in an interactive manner. It was also revealed that turn-taking and the negotiation of meaning contribute to the growth of students' communicative competence. At the same time, a number of problems were identified, including dominant speakers, unequal participation and discussions that lack a clear purpose. The article offers practical recommendations for overcoming these drawbacks.

Key words: speaking skill, group discussion, communication, communicative competence, turn-taking, EFL.

Annotatsiya: Mazkur maqolada ingliz tilini çet tili sifatida örganayotgan talabalarning oğzaki nutq könikmalarini şakllantirişda guruhli muhokama usulining örni tahlil qilinadi. Tadqiqot xalqaro munosabatlar yönalişida tahsil olayotgan talabalar bilan bir oy davomida olib borilgan amaliy maşğulotlarga asoslanadi. Iş jarayonida sifat va miqdoriy tahlil usullari uyğun holda qöllanildi. Natijalar guruhli muhokama talabalarni nafaqat gapirişga, balki suhbatdoşini diqqat bilan tinglaş va unga öz vaqtida javob qaytarişga undaşini körsatdi. Şuningdek, navbat bilan sözlaş va ma'noni kelişib aniqlaştiriş orqali kommunikativ kompetensiya rivojlanişi aniqlandi. Şu bilan birga, ayrim talabalarning suhbatda ustunlik qilişi, iştirokning notekisligi hamda muhokamalarning aniq maqsadga ega emasligi kabi muammolar ham qayd etildi. Maqolada uşbu kamçiliklarni bartaraf etişga qaratilgan amaliy tavsiyalar berilgan.

Kalit sözlar: oğzaki nutq könikmasi, guruhli muhokama, muloqot, kommunikativ kompetensiya, navbat bilan sözlaş, EFL.

Аннотация: В статье рассматривается роль групповой дискуссии в формировании навыков устной речи у студентов, изучающих английский язык как иностранный. Исследование опирается на практические занятия, проводившиеся в течение одного месяца со студентами направления "Международные отношения". В работе сочетались качественные и количественные методы анализа. Полученные данные свидетельствуют о том, что групповая дискуссия побуждает студентов не только говорить, но и внимательно слушать собеседника, своевременно реагируя на его реплики. Кроме того, установлено, что соблюдение очерёдности высказываний и согласование смысла способствуют развитию коммуникативной компетенции. Вместе с тем выявлены и определённые трудности: доминирование отдельных участников, неравномерное вовлечение студентов, а также отсутствие чёткой цели у некоторых обсуждений. В статье предложены практические рекомендации по преодолению указанных недостатков.

Ключевые слова: навыки устной речи, групповая дискуссия, общение, коммуникативная компетенция, очерёдность высказываний, EFL.

INTRODUCTION

Since English has firmly established itself as a lingua franca, the greater part of international communication is carried out in this language, whether the subject is education, politics, medicine, sport, business or technology. Consequently, many learners regard speaking as the skill that deserves the most attention, because it directly determines their ability to take part in such communication. Teaching speaking, however, is a complex task, as it involves not only linguistic accuracy but also the ability to manage interaction in real time [1].

For students of international relations, the issue is especially acute. Their future profession involves negotiations, briefings, conferences and informal exchanges with foreign partners, where a speaker must formulate an opinion quickly, support it with arguments and react to the views of others. Traditional classroom formats,

in which the teacher asks a question and a single student answers, rarely prepare learners for such situations, since they offer little practice in spontaneous, multi-party interaction. Group discussion, by contrast, places students in a setting that resembles real communication: several participants share the floor, ideas are challenged and meaning has to be clarified on the spot.

The object of this study is the process of teaching speaking to EFL students at university level, and its subject is group discussion as a classroom activity. The aim of the article is to identify the impact of group discussion on students' speaking skills and to reveal its possible drawbacks. To achieve this aim, the following tasks were set: to review the relevant literature, to apply group discussion in regular lessons, to analyse its advantages and limitations, and to formulate practical recommendations for teachers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The problem of teaching and assessing speaking has been widely discussed in applied linguistics. The theoretical basis for interactive speaking activities is largely provided by the concept of communicative competence. M. Canale and M. Swain describe it as a combination of grammatical, sociolinguistic and strategic components, stressing that knowing the rules of a language is not sufficient without the ability to use them appropriately and to cope with communication breakdowns [2]. This view shifted the focus of language teaching from the mastery of forms to the ability to communicate meaning.

Several influential hypotheses explain why interaction supports language development. M. Long's interaction hypothesis holds that conversational adjustments, such as clarification requests and confirmation checks, make input more comprehensible and draw the learner's attention to language form; this process is commonly referred to as the negotiation of meaning [7].

M. Swain, in turn, argues that learners also need opportunities for output: when they are pushed to express themselves, they notice gaps in their knowledge and try to fill them [12].

From a sociocultural perspective, L. S. Vygotsky emphasises that learning first takes place on the social plane, through collaboration with more capable others, and is later internalised by the individual [16]. Taken together, these positions suggest that discussion among peers is not merely practice of already known language but a genuine mechanism of learning.

Practical aspects of teaching speaking are examined in a number of methodological works. A. Burns reviews the main approaches to teaching speaking and highlights the importance of developing learners' interactional skills [1].

J. C. Richards distinguishes between talk as interaction, talk as transaction and talk as performance, noting that each requires different teaching strategies [10].

S. Thornbury considers discussion one of the most natural speaking activities and points out that its success depends on careful preparation and on the relevance of the topic to learners [13].

J. Harmer likewise recommends discussions, debates and consensus-reaching tasks, but warns that students need time to formulate their ideas before they are able to speak fluently [3].

E. Palmer treats listening and speaking as interrelated core skills and offers practical strategies for teaching them in the classroom [9], while I. Timmis examines how teaching materials can be designed to develop speaking skill [14].

The literature also describes typical difficulties of speaking activities. P. Ur identifies four main problems: inhibition, having nothing to say, low or uneven participation, and the use of the mother tongue [15].

The first of these is closely related to foreign language anxiety, which E. K. Horwitz, M. B. Horwitz and J. Cope describe as a specific complex of feelings and behaviours that can prevent learners from speaking even when they possess the necessary knowledge [4]. Uneven participation, in turn, is connected with the organisation of turn-taking.

H. Sacks, E. A. Schegloff and G. Jefferson showed that ordinary conversation follows systematic rules for allocating turns [11]; learners who have not mastered these rules in a foreign language often either remain silent or interrupt inappropriately.

D. W. Johnson and R. T. Johnson propose cooperative learning principles, such as positive interdependence and individual accountability, as a means of ensuring that every group member contributes [6].

Finally, T. Isaacs [5] and B. O'Sullivan [8] focus on the assessment of speaking and draw attention to the factors that influence learners' oral performance, including the nature of the task and the interlocutor. Their works are relevant to group discussion, because the performance of each participant depends on the behaviour of the others. Unlike the studies mentioned above, which address speaking in general terms, the present article concentrates specifically on group discussion and examines both its benefits and the practical problems that arise when it is used with EFL university students.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Qualitative and quantitative methods were employed to conduct this research. The participants were university students majoring in international relations. For one month, group discussions were included in every lesson in order to improve the students' speaking. Throughout this period, the students' participation and interaction were observed, which made it possible to identify both the benefits and the drawbacks of group discussion.

Each discussion was organised in several stages. At the preparatory stage, the teacher introduced the topic, activated the necessary vocabulary and gave students a short time to think about their position. During the main stage, students discussed the issue in groups, trying to reach a common conclusion or to compare different viewpoints. At the reporting stage, a representative of each group summarised the main ideas for the whole class. The final stage included feedback, in which the teacher commented on the content of the discussion, on the strategies used by the students and on recurrent language errors.

Topics were selected in accordance with the students' specialisation and their level of English. They included issues of international cooperation, global challenges, cultural differences in communication and current events. Such topics were expected to give learners something meaningful to say and to connect classroom speaking with their future professional needs. During observation, particular attention was paid to the following indicators: the extent to which each student took part in the discussion, the ability to listen to and build on peers' contributions, the management of turns, and the use of clarification and paraphrase when misunderstandings occurred.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The results indicate that group discussion turned from a simple classroom activity into an effective means of developing speaking, as it motivates students not only to speak but also to listen to their peers and respond to them interactively. Furthermore, group discussion gives learners an opportunity to develop communicative competence, since this type of activity promotes turn-taking and the negotiation of meaning. Nevertheless, several problems were observed, namely dominant speakers, unequal participation and the need for discussions to be purposeful and sufficiently challenging. The main observations and the corresponding pedagogical responses are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: **Effects of group discussion on students' speaking and ways of addressing the identified problems**

Aspect	Observed effect	Pedagogical response
Speaking practice	Students produce longer and more spontaneous utterances than in teacher-led question–answer work.	Allocate regular class time to discussion and gradually increase its length and complexity.
Listening and responding	Learners have to follow peers' ideas closely in order to react to them.	Require each speaker to refer to the previous contribution before adding a new point.
Turn-taking	Students learn to open, hold and pass the floor in a socially acceptable way.	Teach useful phrases for interrupting politely, agreeing, disagreeing and inviting others.
Negotiation of meaning	Clarification requests and paraphrasing occur when ideas are not understood.	Encourage questions such as "Do you mean that…?" and reward successful clarification.
Dominant speakers	A few confident students take most of the speaking time.	Assign rotating roles (moderator, timekeeper, reporter) and set a limit on individual turns.
Unequal participation	Shy or less proficient learners tend to remain silent, especially in large groups.	Form smaller groups, give preparation time and ask every member to contribute at least one idea.
Purpose and challenge	Discussions without a clear goal quickly lose momentum.	Formulate a concrete outcome (decision, ranking, recommendation) and select cognitively demanding topics.

As for the advantages, students learn not only how to speak but also how to behave in a group discussion. First, they should listen carefully and then respond appropriately. Listening alone, however, is not always enough, because participants sometimes have to negotiate hidden meaning. Turn-taking is also involved, which means that interaction is not simply speaking or listening, but a sequence of listening, negotiating and answering.

These observations are consistent with the interaction hypothesis: when a group member did not understand a peer's idea, the resulting clarification requests and reformulations forced both speakers to work on the

form and content of their utterances [7]. At the same time, the need to defend a position in front of classmates acted as the kind of pushed output that M. Swain considers essential for language development [12]. In this sense, group discussion combines input, interaction and output within a single activity, which explains its effectiveness compared with more controlled exercises.

Another positive effect concerns the affective side of learning. Speaking in a small group of peers is usually less threatening than answering in front of the whole class and the teacher. For some learners, this reduced the anxiety described by E. K. Horwitz and colleagues [4] and gave them the confidence to express opinions they would not otherwise have shared. Moreover, the discussion format allowed students to support one another: more proficient learners often helped their partners to find the right word or to complete an idea, which reflects Vygotsky's notion of learning through collaboration [16].

Turning to the disadvantages, in large groups in particular, some students tend to be very active while others remain silent. This results in unequal participation and allows dominant speakers to control the conversation. In addition, discussions should not be meaningless: each of them needs a clear purpose. Students cannot improve their communicative competence unless the discussions are challenging enough, and they should learn something new from every discussion.

The problems identified correspond closely to those described by P. Ur [15]. Dominant speakers were usually students with a higher level of proficiency or a more extroverted personality; their activity, although positive in itself, reduced the opportunities of others. Silent participants, on the other hand, often explained their passivity by a lack of vocabulary or by fear of making mistakes. In several cases, students switched to their mother tongue when the topic became too complex, which confirms the importance of preparing language support in advance. When the task lacked a concrete outcome, the conversation tended to become repetitive and soon came to an end.

The experience gained during the study shows that most of these difficulties can be reduced through careful organisation. Assigning rotating roles, such as moderator, timekeeper, note-taker and reporter, gives each student a specific responsibility and corresponds to the principle of individual accountability in cooperative learning [6]. Limiting group size makes it harder for one person to dominate and easier for quieter students to join in. Short preparation time before the discussion, as recommended by J. Harmer [3], helps learners collect ideas and the language needed to express them. Finally, tasks that require a group to reach a decision, rank options or produce a recommendation give the discussion a clear purpose and make it more challenging.

The role of the teacher also changes in group discussion. Instead of being the main source of speech in the classroom, the teacher becomes an organiser, observer and consultant. During the discussion, the teacher monitors the groups, notes typical errors and successful expressions, and intervenes only when communication breaks down. Feedback given after the activity is therefore more valuable than constant correction during it, since frequent interruptions may discourage students and destroy the natural flow of interaction [13]. Assessment of discussion performance should take into account not only accuracy and fluency but also interactional abilities, such as responding to others and managing turns [5; 8].

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

To sum up, although group discussions involve certain problems related to participation and to the function of the discussion itself, their advantages clearly outweigh their disadvantages. Group discussion develops not only students' speaking but also their listening, turn-taking and negotiation of meaning. It creates conditions that resemble real communication, reduces the anxiety associated with speaking in front of the whole class and allows learners to support one another.

Based on the findings, the following suggestions can be made. First, teachers should divide large classes into smaller groups and assign rotating roles to ensure equal participation. Second, the influence of dominant speakers should be limited through clear rules for turn-taking. Third, students should be given time and language support to prepare before the discussion begins. Fourth, topics should be purposeful, relevant to students' specialisation and sufficiently challenging, and each discussion should lead to a concrete outcome. Fifth, feedback and assessment should cover interactional skills as well as linguistic accuracy. If teachers take these problems into account, group discussion is likely to prove even more effective in the coming years. Further research may focus on measuring the long-term effect of group discussion on students' fluency and on comparing different ways of organising discussion tasks.

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13.00.00 Pedagogika fanlari
13.00.01 Pedagogika nazariyasi. Pedagogik ta’limotlar tarixi
13.00.02 Ta’lim va tarbiya nazariyasi va metodikasi (sohalar böyiça)
13.00.03 Maxsus pedagogika
13.00.04 Jismoniy tarbiya va sport maşğulotlari nazariyasi va metodikasi
13.00.05 Kasb-hunar ta’limi nazariyasi va metodikasi
13.00.06 Elektron ta’lim nazariyasi va metodikasi (ta’lim sohalari va bosqiçlari böyiça)
13.00.07 Ta’limda menejment
13.00.08 Maktabgaça ta’lim va tarbiya nazariyasi va metodikasi
13.00.09 Ijtimoiy pedagogika
07.00.00 Tarix fanlari
19.00.00 Psixologiya fanlari
01.00.00 Fizika-matematika fanlari
02.00.00 Kimyo fanlari
03.00.00 Biologiya fanlari
09.00.00 Falsafa fanlari
10.00.00 Filologiya fanlari
11.00.00 Geografiya fanlari

MAKTABGAÇA VA MAKTAB TA'LIMI

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