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Implementation of Group Work Activities in an Armenian Public High School to

Improve Communicative Skills

A thesis submitted in

partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in Teaching English as a Foreign Language

By

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We hereby approve that this capstone

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Implementation of Group Work Activities in an Armenian Public High School to

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Abstract

Most public school teachers in Armenia still use the Grammar Translation approach and focus on explicitly teaching grammar and memorizing vocabulary. This often creates an environment, where students tend to be passive and do not get enough opportunities to practice speaking. Group work is a method, which is used to motivate learning, provide more opportunities to communicate and increase motivation through learning. The implementation of group work activities can provide teachers with new methods to use in their teaching and make their lessons more interactive.

This action research study aimed to find out whether group work activities were used in one of the public high schools in Yerevan, what the teacher`s and the students` perceptions were about group work in general, and whether the implementation of group work could create more opportunities for students to practice their communicative skills. The participants were ten tenth graders and one English language teacher. The data was obtained both qualitatively and quantitatively through class observations, teacher interviews and student surveys.

The results of the action research indicated that implementation of group work activities could enhance learners` communicative skills and change both the students` and the teacher`s perceptions towards group work.

Keywords: communicative skills, group work, motivation, public school, engagement, implementation of group work.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The importance and role of English cannot be denied, as it is widely used in every field, and it is becoming more important in this era of globalization. The purpose of English language instruction is to prepare learners for effective and efficient communication in English in their social and professional environment.

Group work is a way to improve learners` communicative skills and make language learning easy. It provides more comfortable and supportive learning environment, fosters critical thinking skills, develops individual accountability, improves problem solving strategies, etc. The current study explored if everything mentioned could be achieved with implementation of group work activities in a public-school curriculum.

1.1 Problem Statement

The ability to communicate in real life situations in English is one of the main issues that learners face. Mastering grammar rules and knowing vocabulary do not always provide enough opportunities to speak English freely. Students often face problems communicating and expressing themselves in the target language. As a result, they often do not participate and remain silent during language classes. Most teachers do not give full attention to this problem, because of the lack of appropriate trainings or alternate approaches, the large number of students in the classroom, as well as time limitations. The use of group-focused activities can be a good solution in tackling many of the problems faced by the Armenian English language teachers.

During the two years that I worked at a high school in Yerevan, I discovered that the majority of teachers do not use any kind of group work activities in their

teaching and thus, limit the opportunities for their students to communicate using English. It was the same picture when I visited the same school to conduct my action research: no group activities included in any of the teachers` curricula.

My research attempted to show how implementation of group work activities in their curricula could help enhance learners` communicative skills, create more learner-centered classes and provide the teachers with new methods to use in their teaching.

1.2 **Significance of the Study**

The result of this action research was to determine whether it is possible to create more opportunities for students to practice their communicative skills in an Armenian EFL classroom by implementing group work activities in the curriculum, and if this implementation could change the teacher`s and the students` perceptions towards group work. The study also provided one of the teachers with the opportunity to carry out group work activities during every class for four weeks.

In this vein, the study aimed to shed light on the following research questions:

RQ1. How can implementation of group work activities enhance students` communicative skills in an Armenian EFL classroom?

RQ2. What are the students` and the teacher`s perceptions towards group work?

The definition of the term "group work" will be discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Definition of Group Work

Different definitions have been suggested for the term "group work". Cohen & Lotan describe group work as "students working together in a group small enough, so that everyone can participate on a clearly assigned learning task" (2014). "Group work is a process in which two or more students are assigned a task that involves collaboration and self-initiated language." (Brown, 2001). Davis (2009) focuses on the importance of group work as a teaching and learning technique, involving a small group of learners working together.

The group may work on a single task, or on different parts of a larger task. Gomleksize (2007) defines a group as a collection of three to twenty individuals, who are interdependent, but work cooperatively, share a common goal, and each of them has a specific role during an activity.

Kagan (1994) describes group work as an activity, where learning happens throughout mutual exchange of information.

Johnson and Johnson (1994) outline some features of group work, such as positive interdependence, face-to-face interaction and individual accountability. Students are to understand that each of them has a specific task in order to complete the activity. Thus, each student`s role is extremely important during the process. Face-to-face interaction provides students with different opportunities for oral

practice, and skills like decision-making, negotiation, conflict management are to be mastered during group work activities.

Brumfit (1984) suggests the difference between formal and informal group concepts saying that these two different types of groups have their own functions and features. For example, formal learning groups are more or less permanent, such as when learners are expected to complete specific tasks like assignments. The group members work together until the task is finished. Informal learning groups, on the other hand, are made primarily for carrying out some social purpose activities, whenever people interact in any situation. During the informal group work there will be communication through language skills like speaking and listening.

Scrivenger (1994), Richards and Rodgers (2001) described group work as one of the natural ways of learning a language, where learning depends on exchange of information among the members of the group. This is the reason that pair work activities, which are considered the smallest group, are not usually as dynamic as large group work activities, as there are more people involved in big groups who discuss certain issues, negotiate ideas or solve a problem.

The definitions of group work can be summed up as a learning activity that creates opportunities for students to practice the target language. Both advantages and drawbacks have been identified by researchers that will be discussed below.

2.2 Advantages of Group Work

According to Richards & Rogers (2001) numerous advantages have been identified for group work activities. Gillies (2007) thinks that new patterns of thought can be developed when students speak in groups. Crandall (1999), likewise, notices reduction of learner anxiety, improvement of self-esteem and movement towards positive language learning with the help of group work activities.

Group work has been supported because of its many benefits. Harmer (1991) believes that it facilitates students` participation in classes and reduces anxiety.

Group work can also "provide a context in which individuals help each other." (Brown, 2001).

Some of the reasons for using group work are:

2.2.1 **Group work improves the quality of students` talk**.

According to Long and Porter (1985), one of the benefits of putting students into groups is to create a setting for face to face communication. When students work in groups for some time, they are not limited to just produce grammatically correct isolated constructions. In contrary, they engage in everyday communication. Through this they develop good discourse competence rather than sentences without context.

2.2.2 **Group work promotes a positive affective climate.**

There are many students, who are shy and stressed when expected to speak in public. This stress comes from the belief that they might answer incorrectly. In such

cases, group work can provide a more supporting environment for students to express themselves without additional stress factor. Group work allows students to take risks and experiment within smaller groups and prepare to speak in front of larger groups.

Krashen (1988) suggests the term "affective filter", which includes aspects of anxiety, stress and self-confidence. It does not affect students` language acquisition directly though. Studies that have been conducted by MacIntyre (1989) and Gardner (1985) have indeed shown that learning is slower for students who experience language anxiety. When working individually, students work by themselves. No interaction takes place with classmates. The research that has been conducted by Barnes in 1973 showed that when students work in groups, there are pauses and hesitations, expressions of doubt and the like, which show meaningful communication among group members. This communication creates a richer and more accommodating affective environment and develops language related skills.

2.2.3 Group work motivates learners and increases opportunities for language learning.

Group work can be used as a tool to motivate learners. When low-achieving students reach a goal within their group, it motivates them to achieve something big.

According to Lin et al.(2011), learners often report group work as more interesting and such motivation can drive them to work harder and with pleasure.

Storch (2005) compared the effectiveness of individual work versus group work, when students produced a written text. The interview results showed that most students liked group work because it provided opportunities learn from each other.

2.2.4 **Group work promotes a less stressful learning and "naturalistic environment".**

Group work activities provide "a friendly, non-threatening and supportive environment for students, so they should have more confidence to express their own opinions, exchange information, give suggestions, and receive assistance". (Brumfit, 1984). Students working in a group are free to experiment with the target language.

2.2.5 **Group work is a teaching approach that develops students` critical thinking skills.**

 Group work has become one of the most central language teaching approaches which is being integrated in EFL classrooms. Ibnian (2012) mentions that it is helpful in the TEFL classroom, as it helps students to get involved in different interaction types. Brown (1992) adds that it could change personal, organizational, as well as community problems. According to Vygotsky (1978), in comparison to individual work, group work allows learners to develop critical thinking skills, when students negotiate, argue, discuss ideas, etc.

A research that has been conducted by Somapee in Thailand compared an experimental group, that used cooperative learning and a control group, that used

traditional learning. Surveys and pre-/post- tests used in the research showed that critical thinking skills were better developed and practiced by the experimental group.

2.3 Disadvantages of Group Work

Despite many advantages, implementation of group work has been "a challenge and is not as widespread as it is expected." (Baloche & Brody, 2017; Buchs, Fillipou, Pulfrey & Volpe, 2017).

Researchers report on different difficulties during group work. For example, dominating group members instead of a whole group together(Nihalani, et al., 2010).

Some students do only a little work, but get praised more than the others who do most of the work. Or because of not having a teacher next to themselves all the time, some students do not take the tasks seriously. Some students in a group may work with their friends and leave others. Some students do not like to take orders from the others and may refuse working with specific students in their classroom. Another issue is that the teacher faces the difficulty of grading every group member. Noise is also considered to be one of the biggest disadvantages of group work and may be a reason for many teachers to avoid group work activities. Some teachers think that once students are in groups, they lose control of the class because of the noise. Another drawback of group work is the usage of L1 as it is easier for communication.

According to Buchs, et al. (2017) timing is another challenge for implementation of group work in their curriculum as it is very time consuming. Teachers do not always find time in the curriculum to carry out group work activities.

Clarke (2003) focuses on a very specific thing that language teachers need to be aware of. Data taken from one culture cannot be over-generalized to a different culture. It is important understand how students from a different culture look at group work. For example, one education system can value individual contribution over cooperative work, which might be the reason for some students to like individual work rather than group work. Also, in many cultures the teacher is considered to be at the center, so students will be expecting to be given orders and get knowledge from the teacher. This is very common in Armenian public school EFL classrooms as well.

Brown (2001) mentions five weaknesses of implementation of group work in the classroom, such as loss of control over the students, use of L1 instead of the target language, reinforcement of students' errors, difficulty to monitor all groups, and students` cognitive styles` differences. For example, some learners may prefer to work alone and not in groups and the opposite.

Thornton (1999) and Pica (1994) assume that not all students may participate equally during group work activities, when the teacher is not with them all the time.

Richards and Rodgers (2001) note that implementation of group work activities places an additional burden on teachers who may not want to deal with possible challenges or may have lack of necessary trainings in the field. It may also be due to a lack of understanding of how to use this pedagogical practice in their classrooms. For this purpose, Gillies (2008) conducted a study of junior high school students` performance on a science-based learning activity. The results of the study revealed that students performed better in those schools, where teachers had been trained in

how to organize and implement group work activities in their curriculum than in those schools, where teachers had not been trained properly.

It is important for the teachers to create a stress-free environment, where students are not afraid of making mistakes, where there is a good communication between teachers and students, and where they are emotionally secured (Johnson, et al. 2015).

Blatchford, Kutnick, Baines, and Galton (2003) addressed the difficulties teachers encounter in trying to implement group work activities. They all agreed that to in order to have results during group work, students need to be taught the appropriate interactional skills. Teachers, on the other hand, are expected to be trained on how to form groups, work with them, and the lessons and tasks need to be well organized.

Hertz-Lazarowitz (2008) claims about the importance of preparing the physical space for learning and teaching. Learning tasks should engage students in higher-order thinking. When students are engaged, learning happens much easier.

During the group work activities some members are more influential than the others. It is important to create a setting for the group work members to have equal chances to talk, interact and contribute. This will ensure that the learners and their interlocutors share a need and desire to understand each other.

Richards and Rodgers (2001), Jacobs and Ball (1996) suggest two strategies that may help to create equal interaction between group members: "positive interdependence" and "individual accountability".

Positive interdependence is the coordination of group members` efforts and understanding that what helps one helps all and what hurts one hurts all. It can be achieved through the structure of communicative language task by establishing cooperative norms among group members (Richards and Rodgers, 2001).

Individual accountability is when every member of the group is responsible to contribute his or her fair share for the group success and everyone is assigned a role to play where his/her performance on his/her part of group project will be assessed (Jacobs and Ball, 1996).

Beebe and Masterson (2003) also suggest several drawbacks during group work. One of them is the fact that most people do not like conflict and attempt to avoid it when possible, so there might be pressure by the majority opinion and the individual may agree just to avoid a conflict. Or that an individual may dominate the discussion, which will upset the other members, as they can feel isolated in the decision making process. Some members may just not contribute and may rely on others to do the work. This is a big problem that the groups face. Finally, it may take more time to work in a group than alone, as it takes longer to do tasks when working with others.

Baines, Blatchford and Kutnick (2003) conducted a study on grouping practices in UK with elementary children and came up with results that students are sometimes placed in situations, where they do not benefit from interacting with others. Students rarely worked in groups and directions from an adult were needed. The study results indicated that cooperative learning is not widely used as a practice to facilitate student interaction and learning.

On the contrary to these findings, Brown (2001) suggests that group work is not just about watching and letting students work by themselves. Teachers are supposed to move around and monitor the groups, listen to the ideas discussed and help with decision making. It is recommended to use a piece of paper to jot down the common mistakes. The mistakes may be corrected immediately or incorporated into a lesson. This way common problems and patterns of errors are addressed and reviewed.

In spite of many advantages, implementation of group work activities is not free from challenges and EFL teachers are supposed to be properly trained in order to deal with them. It is important to remember that the main purpose of group work, which is to develop communicative skills, is very difficult to be achieved (Little Wood, 1981; Ur, 1981). There are many challenges that can greatly influence group interrelation and the results. These challenges are to be carefully handled, otherwise group work may turn to be a new kind of teacher dominated class.

As for students, Hammar Chirac and Hempel (2014), emphasize on strategies that can be used by the students as well, such as taking notes, listening actively, dividing responsibilities, cooperating, keeping their opinion and making democratic decisions.

Implementation of group work activities puts a lot of demands on both students and teachers. Students need to learn how to work in groups and teachers need proper trainings to know how to make students work together and learn during this process.

So, based on the findings revealed by the previous empirical research on implementation of group work activities in different contexts and on the advantages and disadvantages pointed out by different educators and researchers, this study

suggests that group work is an efficient tool to incorporate in an EFL classroom and

investigates process of its implementation in an Armenian public high school setting.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

This study employed an action research method aiming to understand how group work could enhance students` communicative skills in an Armenian public high school, as well as to understand the teacher`s and the students` perceptions towards group work in general. The following chapter describes the educational setting of the study, the participants, the data collection instruments, as well as the procedures of data collection and analysis.

3.1 Research Design

The study was an action research. Mixed method approach was chosen for the study, which included three research instruments – class observations, student pre- and post- questionnaires, teacher pre- and post- interviews.

3.2 Restatement of the Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

RQ1. How can implementation of group work activities enhance students` communicative skills in an Armenian EFL classroom?

RQ2. What are the students` and the teacher`s perceptions towards group work?

To reveal the answer to the first research question, the participating students had pre- and post- surveys and the teacher had a pre- and post- interview. The data for the second research question was collected through pre- and post-interviews with the participating teachers, as well as pre- and post- surveys with the students.

3.3 Educational Context and Participants

The research was conducted in one of the public high schools in Yerevan, Armenia. The participants of the study were ten tenth graders and an EFL teacher.

The students were all native speakers of Armenian, aged from 14 to 15, six males and four females. The proficiency level of the participants was low to high intermediate. The English classes took place twice a week for 45 minutes each.

Purposive sampling was chosen for the study as "an effective technique for choosing the respondents from whom the most relevant information can be obtained". (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2008; Patton, 2002). Teachers with more than five years of experience were interviewed, who all taught different grades (10th-12th).

The research lasted for six weeks; two weeks for class observations and four weeks for implementation of group work activities. Only one of the interviewed teachers participated in the implementation of group work activities in her classroom for the four week period.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations have been taken into account during every stage of the study.

Before starting the study, a meeting was scheduled with the principal of the school to introduce the aim of the study and an oral approval was received. The parents of the students gave oral permission for their children to participate in the study.

The teacher interviews were conducted individually and their workload was taken into consideration not to put extra work on the teachers` shoulders.

In order to protect the participants` privacy, they were asked to decide whether or not to write their names on the interview forms or questionnaires.

The information about the school and the participants was kept confidential.

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3.5 Instruments and Data Collection Procedures

The data for the research was obtained both qualitatively and quantitatively through:

- class observations,

- pre- and post- interviews,

- pre- and post- questionnaires.

3.5.1 Class observations

Class observations were the first step in the study. Six lessons were observed in different classrooms to find out what kind of teaching techniques were used by the teachers, how the students communicated and engaged during the classes. Observations provided immediate information needed for the study. The observations were done from February 1st-February 12th. Each teacher was observed twice in different classrooms. Each class lasted for 45 minutes. During the observations the focus was on students` communication in English, team working, interaction, etc. The class observations were evaluated based on the observation form which was made based on the "Teacher Observation Form" provided by Brown (2001, p. 432), (see Appendix A).

3.5.2 Teacher interviews

According to Creswell (2007), Fraenkel and Wallen (2008) interviews are among the most effective methods of collecting qualitative data, as they allow researchers to inquire in detail into the perspectives of the participants. Interviews are described to be one of the best ways to elicit relevant information and personal opinion from the respondents.

After having observed the classes, pre-interviews were conducted with three English teachers. A form was prepared with twelve relevant questions to gather information about teachers` background, their perceptions towards implementation of group work in teaching English, their experiences, if they saw any advantages or disadvantages, as well as what help could be suggested to the teachers for successfully incorporating group work activities in their curricula.(see Appendix B).

A post-interview was conducted with the one teacher, who incorporated group work activities in her classroom for four weeks to see if she noticed changes in her classes. The teacher was asked to discuss if the students changed their behavior and became more active and engaged during group work, if group work affected the students` communicative skills and whether or not the teacher would continue implementing group work activities in her teaching. (see Appendix C).

3.5.3 Surveys

Two surveys were used throughout the research. The first one was designed to gather the students` opinion about group work activities in general, their experiences, likes and dislikes, etc. The pre-survey was done before the implementation of group work. The privacy of the respondents was protected throughout the research so the students were able to provide honest answers to facilitate the study. An eleven-question pre-survey was used for this purpose. (see Appendix D).

A post-survey was conducted with the same group of students after the implementation of group work activities during every class for four weeks, which aimed to see if the students changed their perceptions towards group work, what kind

of group activities they liked the most and why, and if they would like to have group work activities incorporated in the classes. (see Appendix E)

3.6 Data Analysis

The qualitative data obtained from the class observations and the teacher interviews was analyzed descriptively, while the quantitative data from the surveys was analyzed via Excel.

The most important parts of the teacher`s interviews as well as students` survey responses were combined into themes and presented with the help of charts.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

The current study aimed to find out whether implementation of group work activities can enhance learners` communicative skills in an Armenian public high school. It was also very important to identify the attitudes of the participants towards group work in general. Thus, based on the findings revealed by the research instruments, this chapter presents the answers to the guiding research questions.

4.1 Research Question 1

RQ1. How can implementation of group work activities enhance students`
communicative skills in an Armenian EFL classroom?

To answer the first research question, classroom observations, pre-/post-interviews and pre-/post- survey answers were analyzed.

4.1.1 Classroom Observations

The observed six classes showed that the lessons were well paced, the teachers were prepared and organized, moved around and made eye contact with the students and in response the students were attentive and involved in general. One of the more noticeable issues observed was that not enough opportunities were provided for the students to produce and practice the target language. Also, all three teachers used Grammar Translation method in almost every class. In addition, not all of the students participated equally during classes. (see Appendix A)

4.1.2 Teacher Pre- and Post- Interviews

The teacher pre-interview results indicated that though all of the three teachers had worked at school for more than seven years and taught different grades, none were sure that the implementation of group work activities could benefit students`

communicative skills. They all agreed that they needed additional information, more practice and access to sample group work activities. (see Appendix B)

The post-interview, conducted with the teacher who agreed to incorporate different group work activities in her classroom for four weeks had a completely different result. The teacher described her overall experience as very positive and mentioned that the students enjoyed the process of having group work activities implemented in their work. In her opinion, reading, speaking, vocabulary and competitive activities were the most successful. Some of the challenges that the teacher mentioned were time, noise and making sure that students spoke in the target language, as she had noticed the students often used L1 during group work. She also agreed that group work activities could enhance students` communicative skills after even a very short period of time. (see Appendix C)

The pre- and post- interview results turned to be very different and looking at the provided answers, it became clear that not having enough experience and not having tried group work activities were the main reason for the teacher`s negative answers during the pre-interview. The post-interview answers that were provided by the teacher showed that her opinion completely changed, and that she would continue using group work activities to develop the students` communicative skills.

4.1.3 Student Pre - and Post - Surveys

The student pre- and post- survey answers were analyzed and compared via Excel, which will be described below:

The findings showed that the student pre-survey answers were very different than the post-survey responses. In the pre-survey the majority of the students

mentioned that they mostly spoke in Armenian during language classes, and only

three participants chose speaking both Armenian and English. (see Figure 1).

Figure 1:   Pre-survey
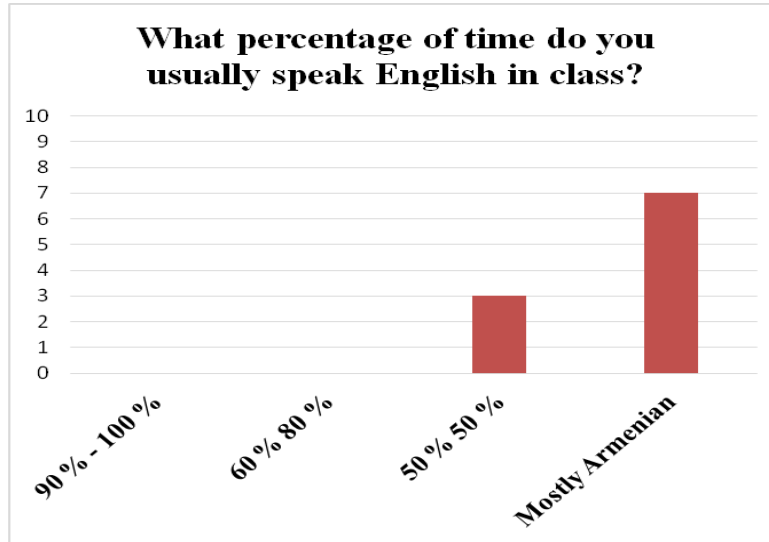
On the contrary to the pre-survey answers, the post-survey revealed that the

usage of L2 had been increased when working in groups. Now most of the students

stated that they spoke English most of the time, and only three students chose

speaking Armenian some of the time, as it was easier for them to express their ideas
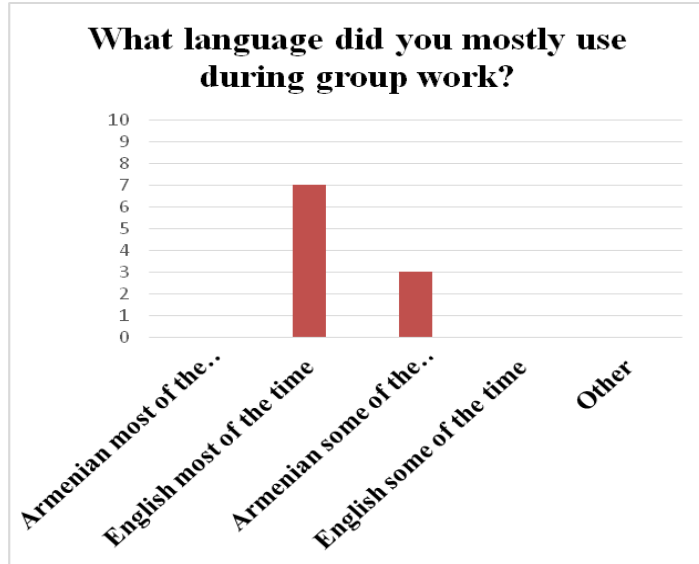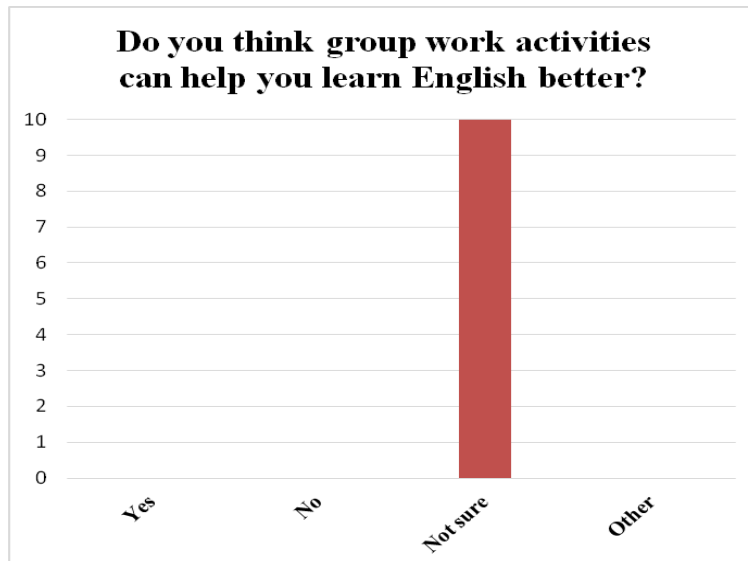
in L1. (see Figure 2)

Figure 2:   Post-survey

The pre-survey also revealed that most of the students didn`t speak English during the classes, because they were afraid of making mistakes, or they were shy to speak in front of a large group. None of the ten students was sure if group work could help them learn speaking English better. (see Figure 3)

Figure 3:   Pre-survey

On the contrary to the pre-survey findings, after having tried group activities for four weeks, most of the students said that group work could help them learn English better and more easily, and only three students did not agree. (see Figure 4)

Figure 4:   Post-survey

In your opinion, can group work help students learn English better and easily?
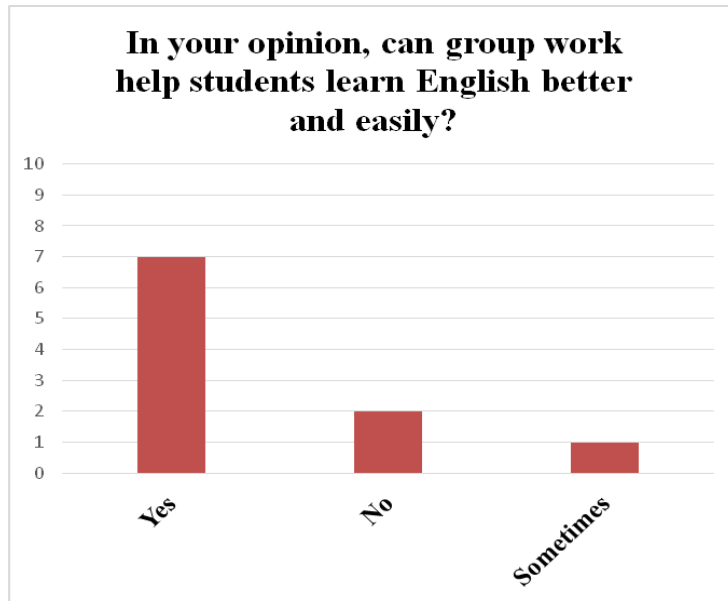
After having tried group activities for four weeks, most of the students had noticeble changes in their speaking skills. The classes were more interactive and student-centered, especially the competitive activities made students to use their full potential to help group mates and succeed, which enhanced communicative skills.

Thus, summerizing the results of the data analysis for the first research question, it was concluded that group work activities could serve as a method to foster communicative skills in an Armenian public high school even in four weeks

4.2 Research Question 2

RQ2. What are the students' and the teacher's perceptions towards group work?

4.2.1 Teacher Pre - and Post - Interviews

To find out the teacher`s perceptions towards group work, pre- and post-interview responses were compared and analyzed. During the pre-interview, the teacher indicated that no group work activities were included in the curriculum, and she never used group work activities with any of the grades she taught, which explained why the students did not have any background knowledge about group work. The teacher did not know how to form groups, what kind of activities could be done in groups, or what skills could benefit more if group work activities were performed in the classroom (see Appendix B).

After having used group work activities for four weeks during the action research, on the contrary to previous answers, the teacher`s perceptions obviously changed. When answering to the post-interview questions, she indicated that group work activities should be incorporated in teaching as a new and productive method. She also admitted that initially she did not believe in the positive impact of group work, but after having tried it, she realized that the students enjoyed it and made more

efforts to speak in English, so she would continue using group work activities moving forward (see Appendix C).

4.2.2 Student Pre – and Post – Surveys

To understand the students` perceptions towards group work, pre-and post-survey answers were compared and discussed. As already mentioned in the result analysis of the first research question, the students` also changed their perceptions towards group work. If in the pre-survey they mostly indicated liking to work individually (see Figure 5), the post-survey showed that after having tried to work in a group they liked it, especially when being in a group with friends (see Figure 6).

Figure 5:   Pre-survey
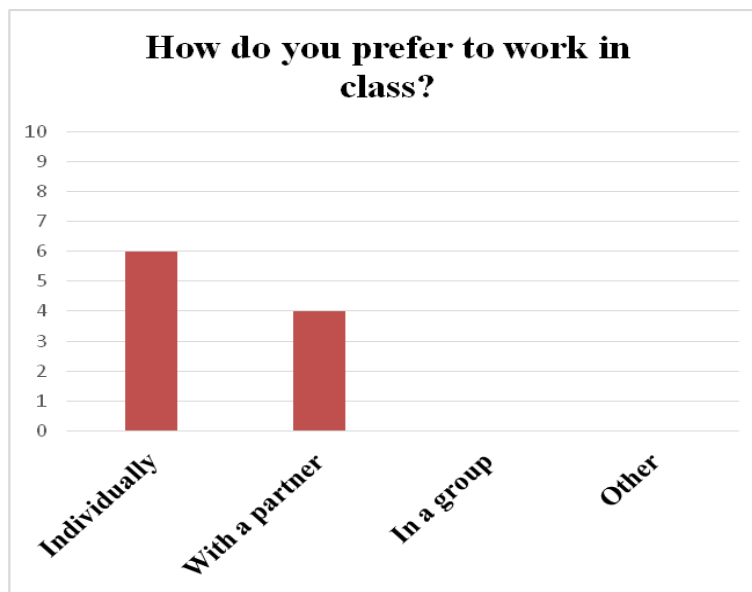
Figure 6:   Post-survey
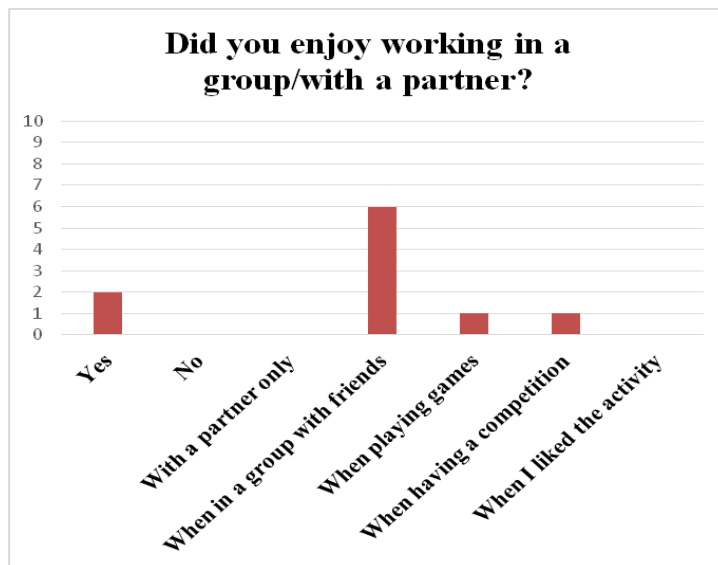
During the pre-survey, the majority of the students claimed that they never did group work activities, three of them mentioned that they would prefer not to have many group work activities and one student thought that the amount of group works they had was sufficient (see Figure 7). But when asked, if they would like to continue having group work activities after having tried for four weeks, all of the ten students answered yes, which proved that the students` perceptions towards group work activities had completely changed from the beginning of the research (see Figure 8).

Would you like your teacher to increase or decrease the amount of group work activities?

Figure 7:   Pre-survey

Would you like to continue having group work activities during the classes?

Figure 8:   Post-survey

These were two major findings after the data analysis, as both the teacher and the students realized the importance of implementation of different pedagogical tools and methods, and how these implementations could completely change their attitude towards language learning.
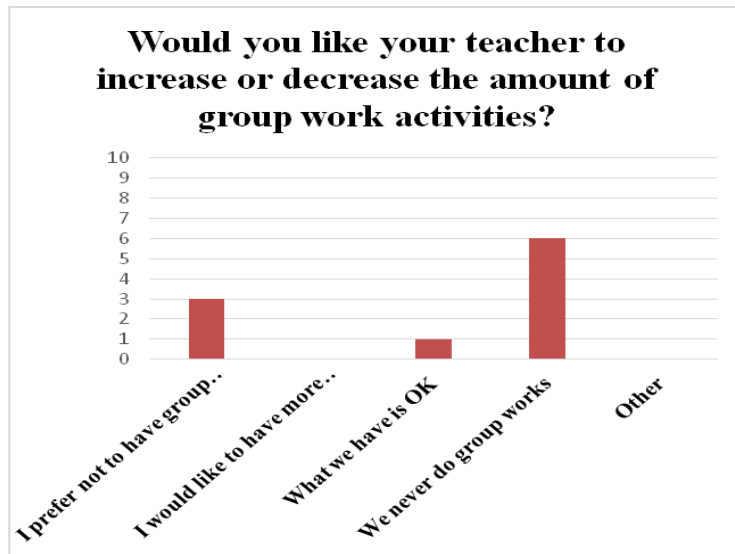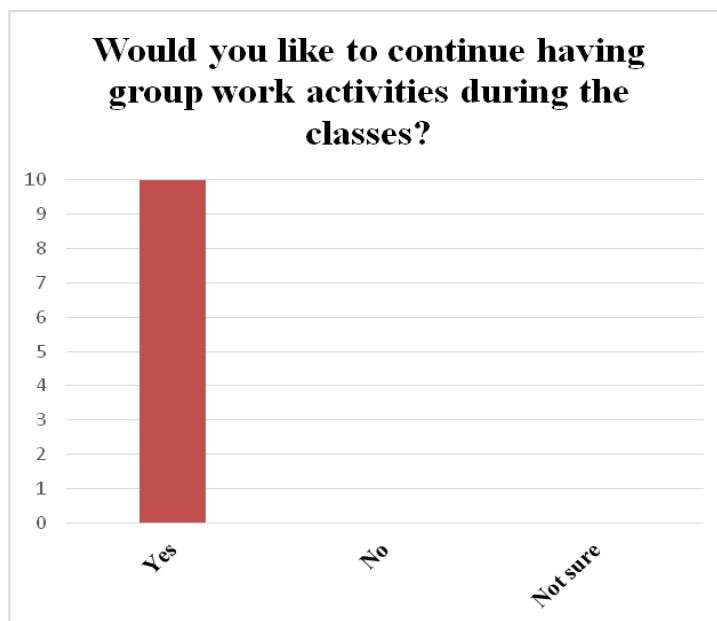
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

5.1 Discussion

The current study aimed at investigating how the implementation of group work activities could enhance learners` communicative skills as well as to understand what the teacher`s and the students` perceptions were towards group work in an Armenian public high school. The following chapter presents the discussion and conclusion based on the findings of the study.

In relation to the first research question, the results indicated that most of the participants agreed with researchers such as Richards and Rodgers (2001) in their belief that group work activities are beneficial for the learners to develop their communicative skills. On the other hand, both the teachers and the students noted difficulties with group work, such as L1 that hindered their communication, reinforcement of students` errors, difficulty to monitor groups, etc.

For the second research question, the study looked at the collected evidence and analyzed the responses to perceive participants` understanding of group work. The results showed major differences in participants` attitudes towards group work before and after the implementation of group work activities for four weeks. As cited by Scrivenger (1994), Brumfit (1984), Richards and Rodgers (2001), the exchange of information among the group members was very useful and the atmosphere was stress-free. The open-ended questions included both in the interviews and the surveys, provided valuable information for directing educators on how to improve group work management and to understand possible challenges that students might experience.

5.2 Pedagogical Implications

Several pedagogical implications have been derived to make the process of implementation of group work activities more efficient.

First, it is recommended that the teachers have trainings on how to organize group activities in their classroom before implementation. It will be very useful to do group activities during these trainings in order to realize the challenges that might be experienced by the learners.

Second, teachers might not be aware of the relative inexperience of their students, sufficient information and directions are to be given to the students before having them participate in group activities.

Finally, major modifications in present school curricula are needed in order to have enough time during a class, as most group activities may be time consuming.

5.3 Limitations and Delimitations

The study encountered several limitations and delimitations.

One of the limitations of the study lies in the fact that this study was carried out only in one high school in Yerevan, thus, the results are only valid for that respective school. Also, the development of communicative skills demands longer time, while the period allocated to carry out this action research in school was limited to only four weeks.

The research experienced several delimitations, such as the educational setting, the age group and the proficiency level, which defined the scope of the study.

5.4 Recommendations for Further Research

To obtain a better understanding on how group work activities can enhance learners` communicative skills, it is recommended to conduct a study for a longer period of time. It`s also highly recommended to carry out further research with a larger sample size, different age groups and different proficiency levels. Also, a research may be conducted to compare two different classrooms having different teachers to see if the difference between the teachers may be a factor.

5.5 Conclusion

The findings of the research suggest that implementation of group work can improve the learners` communicative skills and classroom interaction, help students to be more active in giving suggestions, expressing their ideas and negotiating. Group work also proved to create a stress-free environment for learning, as students were less embarrassed or shy because they were part of a group and felt that their friends would be more understanding when they make mistakes. The study also investigated participants` perceptions regarding the benefits and drawbacks of implementing group work activities and found out that the majority of participants believed that group work might be an effective method for language learning.

However, in light of the present findings, it is necessary to remember that implementation of group work can present a significant challenge both for teachers and for students. As stated by Pica (1994) and Thornton (1999), the classroom may become problematic when implementing group work activities, if teachers and learners do not have enough experience and knowledge about the process.

The results of this action research claim that this study has the potential to make a considerable impact on public school educational system in Armenia and for this purpose, consideration should be given to modifying standardized curricula regarding teaching in public schools.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Class Observation Form

Taken and adapted from H. D. Brown (2001: 432)

1. The teacher was well prepared and organized for the lesson.

2. The lesson was well paced.

3. The directions were clear and concise.

4. An appropriate percentage of the class was students` production of the language.

5. The teacher answered questions carefully.

6. The methods were appropriate to the age and ability of the students.

7. The teacher knew when the students were having trouble in understanding.

8. There were balance and variety in activities during the lesson.

9. The teacher moved around the class and made eye contact with the students.

10. The teacher encouraged full student participation in class.

11. The class felt free to ask questions, to disagree, or to express their own ideas.

12. The teacher was able to control and direct the class.

13. The students were attentive and involved.

14. The teacher was aware of individual and group needs.

15. The students were treated fairly, impartially and with respect.

Appendix B: Teacher Pre-Interview Questions

1. How long have you worked as a teacher?

2. What grades do you teach now?

3. What percentage of the time do you speak English in class?

   a. 90 % - 100 %

   b. 60 % - 80 %

   c. 50 % - 50 %

   d. Mostly in Armenian

   e. Other:

4. Do you use group work activities in your classes?

   a. Yes

   b. No

5. If yes, how often?

   a. During every class

   b. Once a week

   c. 2-3/8 times a month

   d. Never

   e. Other:

6. Do you use group work activities with all grades you teach?

7. How do you form groups? (choose as many as applicable)

   a. Randomly

   b. Whoever they are sitting next to or close to

c. Based on personal relationships

d. Based on gender

e. Other:

8. Is there any difference for you between doing a group work activity with a larger or with a smaller group?

a. Yes (Please explain)

b. No

9. Are there any benefits to incorporating group work activities to improve students` communicative skills?

a. If yes, list some of the benefits:

b. If no, explain why? What are the drawbacks?

10. Which skills and language aspects benefit more from group work? (choose as many as applicable)

a. Writing

b. Speaking

c. Reading

d. Listening

e. Vocabulary

f. Grammar

11. If and when you used group activities, did your students communicate in Armenian or in English during the process, when negotiating and working to complete the task?

12. What are the biggest obstacles or problems teachers and students face while doing group work activities? (choose as many as applicable)

   a. Noise

   b. Setting

   c. Time

   d. Negotiation of meaning

   e. Other:

13. What could be suggested to you to do more group work activities in the classroom?

   a. More information and practice about group work

   b. Same group work activities

   c. Other:

Appendix C: Teacher Post-Interview Questions

1. How would you describe your experience after using group work for four

   weeks?

   a. Very effective overall

   b. Not effective at all

   c. Effective for speaking activities only

   d. Not sure

2. Did your students like group work activities?

   a. If yes, how do you know?

   b. If no, how do you know?

   c. If sometimes, when?

3. Which group work activities were the most successful in your opinion?

   (choose as many as applicable)

   a. Reading

   b. Writing

   c. Speaking

   d. Listening

   e. Competitive activities

   f. Grammar practice

   g. Vocabulary practice

   h. Other:

4. What language was mostly used by the students during group work? (choose

   as many as applicable)

a. Armenian most of the time (90 % - 100%)

b. English most of the time (90 % - 100 %)

c. Armenian some of the time (50 % - 50 %)

d. English some of the time (30 % - 50 %)

e. Russian

f. Other:

5. How often do you think you will use group work after this experience?

a. When the task requires or works better in a group setting

b. During every class

c. Never

d. Sometimes

e. Other:

6. Do you think group work can enhance students` communicative skills?

a. Yes

b. No

c. Not sure

7. What were the biggest challenges you faced while doing group work? (choose

as many as applicable)

a. Time

b. Noise

c. Giving instructions

d. Monitoring the groups

e. Making sure students spoke in the target language

f. Choosing the correct group size (better in pairs or 3s or 5s, etc.)

g. Other:

8. Would you advise other teachers to incorporate group work activities in their teaching?

   a. If Yes, explain why:

   _____

   b. If No, explain why:

   _____

9. How has your perception changed when it comes to group work after these four weeks if it has changed at all?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Appendix D: Students` Pre-Survey

1. What kind of activities do you enjoy doing in class? (choose as many as applicable)

    a. Exercises from our textbook

    b. Exercises from the test books for Admission to universities (Shtemaran, Murphy, etc.)

    c. Extra materials that the teacher prepares

    d. Group activities/tasks

    e. Games

    f. Writing tasks (writing stories, finishing a sentence)

    g. Listening tasks (songs, watching videos, etc.)

    h. Speaking tasks (dialogues, plays, skits, role plays)

    i. Competitive tasks (competing against your peers/peer groups)

    j. Other:

2. How do you prefer to work in class?

    a. Individually

    b. With a partner (pairwork)

    c. In a group (3-5 students)

    d. Other:

3. Which activities do you enjoy the most?

    a. Reading

    b. Writing

    c. Speaking

d. Listening

e. Vocabulary practice

f. Grammar activity

4. What language do you use when communicating during pair work?

   a. Armenian most of the time (90 % - 100 %)

   b. English most of the time (90 % - 100 %)

   c. Armenian some of the time (50 % - 50 %)

   d. English some of the time (30 % - 50 %)

   e. Russian

   f. Other:

5. How useful do you think it is for you to work in a group?

   a. Very useful

   b. No difference

   c. Not useful at all

   d. Not sure

   e. Other:

6. Are there any preferences for you to form a group?

   a. I like to be in the same group with my friends

   b. I like to be in the same group with the most advanced students

   c. It doesn`t matter who I am in group with

   d. I don`t like working with others

   e. Other:

7. How would you consider your communication skills during group work activities?

   a. I communicate and express my thoughts more actively when working in a group

   b. I don`t like to discuss and negotiate my thoughts and do not speak much in groups

   c. I am active both during group work and when working individually

   d. I stress having to use English during group work, what if I make a mistake, so I don`t.

   e. Other:

8. Would you like your teacher to increase or decrease the amount of group work activities?

   a. I will prefer not to have many group work activities

   b. I enjoy group work and would like to have them more often

   c. The amount we have now is OK

   d. We never do any group or pair work in class

   e. Other:

9. Do you think group work activities can help you learn English better?

   a. Yes

   b. No

   c. Not sure

   d. Other:

10. What are some of the challenges you face when working with others in groups or pairs? (choose as many as applicable)

   a. Noise

   b. The room and seating or desk setup

   c. Time

   d. Not everyone participates equally

   e. Not agreeing with others` ideas

   f. Teacher`s instruction unclear

   g. Other:

11. What do you think is the reason for getting students to work in pairs or groups instead of regular teacher-student interaction?

   a. To improve speaking skills

   b. To help each other

   c. Students learn better from each other

   d. To have fun

   e. To speak more freely

   f. Don`t know

   g. Other:

12. Why do you think students do not speak English when working with a partner or in a group?

   a. Because they are embarrassed

   b. Because they feel silly

   c. Because they are afraid of making mistakes/errors

d. Because they are shy

e. Because they don`t know English enough

f. Other:

Appendix E: Students` Post-Survey

1. Did you enjoy working in a group or with a partner? (choose as many as applicable)

    a. Yes

    b. No

    c. Only with a partner, not the bigger groups

    d. When I was in group/pair with my friend(s)

    e. When we were playing games

    f. When there was a competition

    g. When I liked the activity

2. Were the group work activities interesting and engaging for you?

    a. Yes

    b. No

    c. Not sure

3. Which activities did you enjoy the most? (choose as many as applicable)

    a. Running dictation

    b. Who is he/she?

    c. Fishbowl debate

    d. Choose your own vocabulary

    e. Puzzle

    f. Stump your partner

    g. Interview

    h. Comprehension check

4. What language did you mostly use during group work?

   a. Armenian most of the time (90% - 100 %)

   b. English most of the time (90 % - 100 %)

   c. Armenian some of the time (50 % - 50 %)

   d. English some of the time (30 % - 50 %)

   e. Russian

   f. Other:

5. Would you like to continue having group work activities during the classes?

   a. Yes

   b. No

   c. Not sure

6. Did you talk more or less during the group work?

   a. I talked English more during group work

   b. I talked English less during group work

   c. The same as I used to

   d. Other:

7. What did you dislike when working in a group? (choose as many as applicable)

   a. Lack of attention

   b. Noise when everyone is speaking

   c. Other students talking more than me

   d. Not having enough time

   e. Uncomfortable to move around in order to join group mates

f. Not always being able to express my personal opinion

g. Other:

8. In your opinion, can group work help students learn English better and easily?

    a. Yes

    b. No

    c. Sometimes

9. Do you think that group or pair tasks help you learn better? Please explain:

    _____

    _____

    _____

    _____

    _____