

# A Study on The Effectiveness of Group Work in English Majors' Pronunciation Classes at Ho Chi Minh City University of Food Industry

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## ABSTRACT

Pronunciation is, unarguably, an essential factor that decides the success of communication. Poor pronunciation not only affects the speakers' self - confidence but can also cause a misunderstanding or even communication break - down in the worst case. Consequently, it has gained considerable attention in English learning and teaching. Both teachers and language educators have struggled to make sure their learners can pronounce at the most satisfactory level. A variety of techniques and methods have been discussed. In this paper, the author has examined the advantages of group work as an alternative way to improve English majors' pronunciation skill in her own educational setting with specific characteristics of its own students. The results show that group work can help increase the learners' amount of practice time and their engagement in the lessons, boost their learning motivation. Besides, some suggestions have also been made to exploit this technique most efficiently, which include rearrangement of physical setting, applying suitable assessment methods, practical guides and reasonable grouping of students. Due to limited time, resources and the scope of this paper, the study has been done basing on the review and analysis of related literature and the real conditions of her school. However, the findings will certainly bring more insights and serve as encouragement for teachers and educators to apply in similar language teaching contexts.

**Keywords:** Groupwork; Pronunciation; Teaching technique.

## 1 Introduction

In the age of international corporation and integration, ability to communicate in English effectively has become indispensable. To get their message across, speakers must at least acquire comprehensible pronunciation. Mispronunciation not only affects the speakers' self - confidence, makes the listeners feel uncomfortable, but may also cause misunderstanding or communication breakdown. Likewise, an ability to pronounce appropriately will ensure comprehension and create a good impression which are decisive factors in successful communication. Consequently, satisfactory pronunciation has become a requirement for any English competent users. Being aware of this demand, Ho Chi Minh City University of Food Industry (henceforth, HUFU) has provided their English - majored students a pronunciation course in order to equip them with this important linguistic skill. A lot of effort has been made, yet the results are still far from the expectation due to various factors such as class size, limited time and mixed proficiency learners. To address these problems and to enhance the result of pronunciation teaching in HUFU, group work is believed to be an efficient technique.

This paper, therefore, is done to investigate the effects of group work in English pronunciation class in HUFU. Besides, the author also tries to find out ways to enhance the benefits of this technique.

The following question guides the study:



What are the effects of group work in English Pronunciation classes at HUFU?

## 2 Background to the study and Methodology

The pronunciation course is offered to English - majored students in HUFU in their first semester with an aim to provide them basic knowledge and English articulation skill. "Pronunciation in use" is deployed as the main course book which is taught in 10 weeks. That is 3 periods/ week and 30 periods in total. This short duration is, obviously, a big obstacle for teachers to train their students to a satisfactory pronouncing level. The challenge of the task is added by a big class size of 50 students on average. Consequently, it is impossible for teachers to correct mistakes for individuals or follow their progress.

Besides, students come from various backgrounds with different English learning experiences. Those from the countryside have lower competence and less experience in using English for communication. Unsurprisingly, they often take Vietnamese articulating habits when they speak English. That is the biggest reason for their reluctance to speak out in class. A change in the learning environment makes these students find it hard to adapt immediately. Thus, many of them are very passive in learning and often remain silent in class. These negative facts heavily hinder them from making improvement.

Last but not least, all pronunciation lessons in HUFU are conducted in mixed ability classes where advanced students may find some knowledge areas are not challenging enough for them while low proficiency peers are still struggling with new ways of producing sounds and utterances. This problem not only causes difficulties for teachers' class management but also affects the learning and teaching quality. A slow progress certainly results in students' low learning motivation. Some of them may feel that easy lessons can not equip them with necessary knowledge and skills. Whereas others may feel that they do not get enough help and attention from their teachers to catch up with their classmates.

Although group work is believed to deal well with the above mentioned problems, a thorough study of its effects in English pronunciation classrooms requires a lot of time and involvement of all related parties, namely teachers and students. However, due to limited time and scope of this paper, this research is conducted by reviewing, analysing of related literature within the author's teaching and learning conditions.

## 3 Literature review

### 3.1 English pronunciation teaching

English learners often complain that its pronunciation is difficult because of its irregular pronunciation and its inconsistency with spellings. Furthermore, their first language pronouncing habits often influence the way they make the sounds of the new language they learn. (Laroy, 1995) claims that "gradually we become attuned to our mother-tongue and tend to hear everything under its influence ". Last but not least, some English sounds do not exist in their native tongue. Consequently, it costs students a lot of effort, time and practice to train their articulatory organs to make the new sounds correctly. Otherwise, they tend to articulate English the way they do to their first language. Other supra - segmental aspects including stress, length of vowels and intonation add more challenges to them.

### 3.2 Group work

According to Morris, (2016) group work is a way of teaching that exploits the principles of student - centered approach which focuses on collaboration, cooperation, and teamwork. By working together in groups to complete assigned tasks, students are more independent and more supportive of each other during their learning process. Sharing his view, Roney, (2010) also defines group work as a classroom practice where "students work in teams to construct knowledge and accomplish tasks through collaborative interaction". In these two definitions, collaboration among team members is the most prominent feature, which serves as the core of the technique. Many researchers believe that group work deploys the principle

of collaborative learning theory which refers to teaching methods in which students work together in small teams to learn academic knowledge. Learning occurs when they discuss and exchange opinions and help each other, etc. to complete a given task.

### **3.3 Previous research related to group work in English teaching.**

For its pedagogical benefits, group work has been strongly advocated in English teaching. Harmer, (1991) confirms that this technique promotes students' involvement in learning activities and lower their anxiety. Therefore, it helps to enhance their language communication skills in classes. Meanwhile, Brown, (2001) finds out that group work creates a context in which individuals can help each other. Sharing his view, Alfares, (2017) also believes that support and encouragement from their teammates benefits students cognitively, emotionally and motivationally.

Apart from theoretical research, many studies have also been done in real contexts to find out the effectiveness of group work. The one done by Pica & Doughty, (2008) to evaluate its role in the classroom allows them to confirm the good effects on second language acquisition.

In order to improve their students' speaking skill, a group of lecturers from Thai Nguyen University Dinh Bac et al., (2018) introduced group work into their class. Class observation and interviews help them draw out the positive consequences generated from the deployment of this technique which include increasing motivation for learning, positive feelings for friendship, and problem-solving.

In her study which aims to explore the effects of group work in teaching English speaking skills to general nurse students at Da Nang University Of Medical Technology And Pharmacy, Anh, (2018) finds out that the learners have positive attitudes towards group work in class. This result helps her to confirm the significant pedagogical value and the usefulness of this teaching technique in a language classroom if group activities are planned carefully.

To sum up, group work is not a new practice in English teaching. However, it is useful to investigate its pedagogical effects in various courses in different settings. Furthermore, it seems that its use and impacts in pronunciation classes have gained little attention from researchers and language educators. Last but not least, persuaded by the fact that language pronunciation mastery requires frequent practice which can be promoted with the introduction of group work in class, this paper is done to examine how it works in her teaching context.

## **4 Effectiveness of group work in HUFU pronunciation classes**

### **4.1 Group work increases students' practising time**

Class sizes and limited teaching time are among the biggest concerns in English teaching in HUFU. It is a great pressure for teachers to equip students a huge amount of knowledge about the English sound system as well as its supra - segmental aspects required in the curriculum. The limited knowledge of many students has further added to the time strain allocated for practice. Traditional choral repetition is not effective to address all pronouncing aspects. Furthermore, it is also a big challenge for teachers to recognize their learners' errors when the whole class say aloud together. Meanwhile, many low achievers have to struggle to catch up with the pace of the lessons. In this context, group work can be a satisfactory solution. Bowen & Marks, (1994) believe that whole class practice is not efficient in terms of the ratio of teacher or students, the effort and the length of time for actual language practice. They, therefore, suggest dividing a class into five or six groups so that students' talking time can increase five or six times.

### **4.2 Group work promotes students' active learning in HUFU pronunciation setting**

Vietnamese has a saying: "learning from friends is more effective than learning from teachers". This does not mean to alienate the role of the teachers but to emphasize the importance of learning from peers. In

HUFI English pronunciation classes, this proverb serves as a practical advice. With a big number of learners and limited class time, it is impossible for teachers to address all individual needs. Besides, big classes also discourage shy students from asking their teachers any questions. While those are desperate in need of support but are not tended by their teachers, their friends' timely assistance is really meaningful and valuable. In small groups, they can share knowledge, learn from one another both consciously or unconsciously and help out with specific pronunciation problems.

Assigning students to work in groups also provide chances for them to be more independent and take a more active role. This is in line with the principles of modern teaching approaches, which requires students to be the center of the learning process and teachers serve as the facilitators who, instead of leading students through a lesson where they all do the exact same thing at the exact same time, just provide them necessary support. This role switching helps to lessen teachers' burden. Consequently, they can manage class time more efficiently.

Bowen & Marks, (1994) point out that repetitive pronunciation drills to work on a particular sound alone cannot help improving pronunciation. Students' awareness of the articulation of English sounds, the links between sounds and spelling, the relationship between intonation and meaning is also essential. To boost students' acquisition process, these linguistic aspects should not be presented in an uninteresting drill - based way but as tasks that require learners themselves to discover the phonological features of English pronunciation and compare with the pronunciation of Vietnamese. These purposes are, undoubtedly, best achieved in groups where students cooperate with one another to find out the answers.

#### **4.3 Group work improves students' motivation to engage more in pronunciation drills.**

It is an undeniable fact that students from the countryside do not have favorable conditions to learn English communication skills at high school. Consequently, most of them are reluctant to speak out because they are afraid of wrong pronunciation. A big gap in English pronunciation performance between them and their classmates also demotivates many of them. Their anxiety multiplies when they find it hard to follow the pace of the lessons while it is impossible to interrupt teachers frequently to ask for clarification or support. Clearly, group work can deal with all of their aforementioned problems.

First, group work creates a more secure environment for low - level students to try any new sounds or challenging aspects of English linguistics such as intonation, stress, etc. Feeling less embarrassed when making errors encourages them to say out loud the linguistic items they need to master. What is more, they can get timely help from their peers whenever they need. This helps them to keep up with the learning and teaching pace in the class. Undoubtedly, low achievers' motivation is fostered as they make learning progress. Meanwhile, higher-achieving students also find class time more meaningful and interesting when they are challenged to model the articulation for their teammates.

### **5 Conclusions and suggestions**

To sum up, the limited time has only allowed the author of this paper enough time to do a library research, basing on previous findings of researchers in the field and the analysis of the current situation of teaching and learning pronunciation in her school. The result reveals that the introduction of group work to HUFI English major classes can help to promote the students' pronouncing performance because it can (1) boost the amount of practicing time for them (2), encourage their engagement in the lesson as well as their active learning (3) enhance learners' motivation in pronunciation drills. However, to ensure the fruitful effects of group work, a number of obstacles need to be dealt with. First of all, a change of physical setting must be done. There are too many immobile tables in a limited space. Therefore, it is difficult for students to move around and form appropriate groups. Besides, noise from teams sitting too close around also interrupts their practice and keeps them from full concentration.

Next, a change of assessment method is highly recommended. The success of cooperative activities requires the participation of each group member. All students need to participate since the contribution of each of them is decisive to the success of this teaching technique. As a result, group evaluation should be included in the weight of the total score so that students are more responsible to their partners, therefore, would make more contribution and effort in practice. They can be assessed on their own individual contributions to the group as well as their group's pronunciation performance.

Last but not least, practical guides and proper grouping are essential to ensure the effectiveness of group work. HUFU pronunciation course is offered to freshmen who just come from high school. They are familiar to traditional classes in which their teachers instruct them and deliver them knowledge. They may have difficult experiences with being more responsible for their learning at first. Hence, teachers should offer them guides and clear instructions so that they know what and how to do in order to make most of each group activity. Another factor that may hinder their success with this method is the way groups are formed. Each group should consist of mixed ability students so that they can tutor, get help and learn from each other. Apparently, correct grouping always requires teachers' understanding of their students and strong management classroom skills which can be provided to them through training courses.

## **6 Declarations**

### **6.1 Study Limitations**

Although the author has managed to explore the positive impacts of group work on the improvement of pronunciation skill, her study still faces some limitation. First of all, the research is done with the characteristics of her own educational setting. Secondly, limited time restricts her study to review and analysis of literature, while the involvement of the teachers and students will certainly make it more comprehensive.

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