

Group Work: An Alternative to Learn Together

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ABSTRACT

This article intends to provide a general overview of the tenets behind group work, which includes its definition based on different sources, some advice on how to implement it, conditions and characteristics to bear in mind when developing it; stages of development group members may experience and then a connection between collaborative group work and language learning is made through the presentation of some research studies conducted by experts on the topic or even for people who have lived the experience of carrying it out. Finally, this theoretical revision ends up with the presentation of some creative activities that foster group work and some considerations and implications of its implementation.

This theory was revised as a very important part of a research project which main concern was to make an exploration and reflection on what working in groups really means; so to make this possible, contributions from different sources were taken into account, and the purpose is to provide the reader with a closer view on how to make it easier, enjoyable and purposeful for people involved and interested in practicing this widely used strategy.

Key words: group, definition of group work, conditions, collaboration, learning, characteristics, group work activities.

RESUMEN

Este artículo intenta proveer un panorama general de los principios del trabajo grupal, e incluye su definición basada en diferentes fuentes, algunas sugerencias o recomendaciones sobre cómo implementarlo, condiciones y características para tener en cuenta cuando éste se desarrolla; etapas de desarrollo que los miembros del grupo pueden experimentar; luego se presenta una conexión entre el trabajo en grupo colaborativo y el aprendizaje de un idioma, a través de la presentación de algunos estudios investigativos llevados a cabo por algunos expertos en el tema o aun por personas que han vivido la experiencia de trabajarlo. Finalmente, esta revisión teórica termina con la presentación de algunas actividades grupales creativas que lo promueven o impulsan, y algunas consideraciones y conclusiones de su implementación.

Esta teoría fue revisada como fundamento importante de un proyecto de investigación, cuyo objetivo principal fue hacer una exploración y reflexión sobre lo que realmente significa el trabajo grupal, por lo tanto, para hacer esto posible fue importante recurrir a varias fuentes y contribuciones, para mostrarle al lector un acercamiento a esta estrategia de una manera divertida y exitosa para quienes están involucrados o interesados en poner en práctica el trabajo en grupo, ampliamente utilizado en muchos contextos y por muchos agentes.

Palabras clave: grupo, definición de trabajo grupal, condiciones, características, colaboración, ventajas, desventajas, actividades grupales.

INTRODUCTION

Group work has been implemented for many years in different fields other than education and since that time, there have been people interested in exploring their nature, processes and outcomes. I decided to explore how group work could be used appropriately in a classroom setting, since it seems easy to tell students "get together and do this", but you find that group work is not as easy as it seems. Once you have read about all the issues this strategy involves, you gain some awareness on how to get the best out of it and what it really entails. As Allan Brown (1992:8) argues[...] groupwork provides a context in which individuals help to each other; it is a method of helping groups as well as helping individuals; and it can enable individuals and groups to influence and change personal, group, organizational and community problems. Thus, when you work in group it is important to be aware that our acts and actions always influence own and others' behaviors and ways of thought. According to the interactionist view of language learning, language acquisition is the result of an interaction between the learners' mental abilities and the linguistic environment; in other words, knowledge is constructed jointly by all the people involved in the process.

I am aware of the fact that many language teachers might think this is just repetition; however, I hope that readers can find new and useful elements that let them explore this approach under innovative points of view in order to give or promote in their pupils or group members more opportunities to develop social, affective and cognitive abilities that lead them to a more confident and beneficial learning environment.

I consider this topic of great significance in the field of language learning and teaching because as Vigotsky (1978) pointed out "knowledge is socially built through people interactions". My understanding of this statement is that people need from each other to be a complete being; everybody has something to contribute and as the result of the interactions

people are able to construct meaning and knowledge, so group work could be seen as a perfect room for individuals to know, explore, experience, share and learn together.

This paper includes various sections that will give the reader a walk through an interesting and meaningful path, and will also provide some good advice for not getting lost. In the first place, the reader will find some definitions of groups deepening in group work, then, some group issues like characteristics, conditions, connection among collaborative group work, language learning and stages of group development are presented. Besides, the reader will find some useful ideas to implement within the classroom with some considerations and implications from group work implementation.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is a theoretical advance which describes some relevant issues about group work and how it might be an interesting alternative to be implemented in the EFL classroom. The article deals with definitions of terms and concepts related to the topic and presents a clear description of the conditions, characteristics, stages and connections between collaborative group work and language learning, added to useful group activities and ideas about interesting and practical ways to be used by many people in different contexts according to the purposes of implementation.

The information included in this article is the result of a deep investigation on the topic and the purpose of this is to provide the potential readers with some theoretical tools which allow them to be conscious that there is an appropriate way to take advantage of this widely used strategy within the classroom. Readers can also be aware of the benefits of using this alternative of work; benefits that are perceived not only in the cognitive but also in the social or affective dimensions, and not only as individuals or group members, but also as members of a community.

THEORETICAL REVISION

Group and group work meaning

The social nature of human beings allows us to share, interact, build, acquire and develop abilities, knowledge, experiences that in different ways transform the view we have of the surrounding world. Group work, under proper conditions, encourages peer learning and peer support and establishes a more confident and relaxed environment for learning to occur. I write "proper conditions" because there are several ways to implement group work,

some of them effective and some others ineffective. Effective because the processes group members have been through, have allowed them to reach the goals or purposes to a great extent; or on the contrary, ineffective because of the lack of cohesion, structure and non well-defined goals within the group, lead them to an unsuccessful experience both in its process and in its outcomes.

Thus, with these assertions it is clear that a true group is more than a simple collection or aggregate of individuals but the reunion of people with clear objectives, with characteristics that may include interests, values, ethnic or social background, and where all their members are willing to participate as active members.

Groups are a fundamental part of social life, they can be very small - just two people - or very large, but the ideal number of members according to many researchers is from three to six, because it is not a small number neither big and all group members can contribute to the same degree without feeling afraid of being exposed in front of classes. They enjoy a relaxed atmosphere where contributions are made in a non threatening environment; they can be highly rewarding to their members and to society as a whole.

There are also significant problems and dangers with them if not handled appropriately. Groups may have positive or negative characteristics, processes and outcomes; it depends on the way they are faced and approached. If you consider the conflicts and negative situations as something that normally and necessarily occur within the group, maybe your group will overcome this stage and will experience a stronger ability to solve problems as an inherent part of this strategy; but, if on the contrary, you want to avoid them and expect to find everything perfect; maybe you are wasting the chance of becoming stronger and able to face any difficulties. All this makes them an essential focus for exploration and research.

Homans (1950) mentions an additional component in group work which is the importance of good direct communication channels among group members. If people do not use them appropriately it is almost impossible to reach a common goal; it would seem like each other pursuing to achieve different purposes in different directions. Finally, Turner (1987) points out that "a group is defined as one that is psychologically significant for the members, to which they relate themselves subjectively for social comparison and the acquisition of norms and values, in which they privately accept membership, and which influences their attitudes and behaviour." Thus, group members have the chance to interrelate and create their own norms and therefore their values which influence the way they act and behave within the group.

Bearing this in mind, it is pertinent to present a group work definition by Brown (1999) who states that "group work provides a context in which individuals help each other and is a method of helping groups as well as helping individuals that can enable individuals and groups to influence and change personal, group, organizational and community problems." So, group work becomes a powerful instrument not only for individuals but for the community where groups interact. Schulman (1979) states in his definition "mutual aid system" where participants look to strengthen the chance group members have to help each other, to build more fulfilling lives for themselves and for the others, to look for some changes in order to cope with problems through purposeful experiences that benefit them in different ways.

In short, all the previous definitions have brought different aspects together; social relationships, collaboration, mutual aid, direct communication, norms and values acquisition, skills development, membership and goals. All of them are worthwhile aspects to establish connections that summarize important issues to have in mind when describing group work. According to this, it could be defined as a tool where social relationships are established among members and where direct communication allows the creation of norms, roles and responsibilities in order to achieve some goals or purposes through mutual collaboration.

What I found very interesting from all of these definitions and what I can contribute from my teaching practice is that most of us agree with the fact that groups provide spaces for people to interact, communicate, learn, explore, develop values and accept behaviours under the rules or norms, patterns of organization established in order to work jointly toward a goal or achievement; it gives the participants the sense of involvement and commitment to carry out the tasks or projects proposed. Now, bearing in mind what groups are, I will present a description of how group work is viewed and some characteristics it needs to have in order to be enriching and successful.

Conditions and characteristics to develop group work

Brown (1999) and Turner (1987) find that a general level of acceptance among group members is an important aspect when developing group work. It is advisable for good group work that members do not pay attention to aspects such as physical appearance, living conditions, abilities, economic and family status of their members or other aspects and try to focus on contributions, support, commitment, responsibility with the roles and tasks they have agreed on carrying out in order to establish deeper and stronger interpersonal relationships. In this case, those close relationships are cultivated through the interaction among members and are arisen in the same way. They learn to respect and tolerate each other and the way they are; it gives acceptance a space to arise.

They also state that a good way to promote this feeling among members is learning about each other, having proximity, contact, interaction and cooperation; valuing the rewarding nature of group experience and the successful completion of whole-group tasks, developing extracurricular activities, experiencing joint hardship, common threat, intergroup competition and teachers' role modeling. In other words, living the experience of being part of a group and building a sense of confidence through mutual scaffolding.

In relation to cooperation, Johnson and Johnson (1995) define it as a type of interaction in which students are positively interdependent which will result in "an emotional bonding with collaborators liking each other, wanting to help each other to succeed, and being committed to each other's well-being." Group participants experience group membership by involving the joy of doing the activities, approval of the goals, and success in achieving a goal and personal benefits and, some others are the ongoing reminders of how effective the groups can be when working together. Once group members have passed through this experience they can be more cohesive and can be really named a "group." These initial elements of groups structure are the emerging patterns of peer/intermember relationships which help to construct a classroom identity and a sense of a learning community.

Zoltan and Murphy(cited in Dörnyei, Z. and Murphy, T., 2003) mention determining features of a group and I also include here some additional group attributes quoted by Benson (2000). According to them, there is some interaction among group members where they perceive themselves as a distinct unit and demonstrate a level of commitment to it. Group members share some purpose or goal for being together so the group endures for a reasonable period of time.

The group develops some sort of internal structure which includes the regulation of entry and departure into/from the group, rules and standards of behaviors for members, relatively stable interpersonal relationship patterns and an established status hierarchy and some division of roles; as a direct consequence of the above points, the group is held accountable for its members' actions, that is to say they share beliefs, values, and norms about areas of common interest. They also define themselves as a group. Regarding the previous assertions; being part of a group involves being part of a process where everything needs to be interweaved, structured and organized so that the individuals and the group itself may obtain the expected results.

Most groups experience some situations that are normal when group members decide not to work alone. They are mentioned and explained in the following item which has to do with group development where their stages are displayed.

Group development

Tuckman(1965) proposed a model of groups' development which included four stages: forming, storming, norming and performing, and in 1977 with Jensen added a last stage called adjourning. The following graph shows the model with the four stages mentioned previously and which are closely connected to more recent models like that proposed by Ehrman and Dörnyei in Dörnyei and Murphey (2003). Although this model could be considered for many as out of fashion or too old to be considered, the truth is that most researchers have taken it to explain the same processes, but with different names.

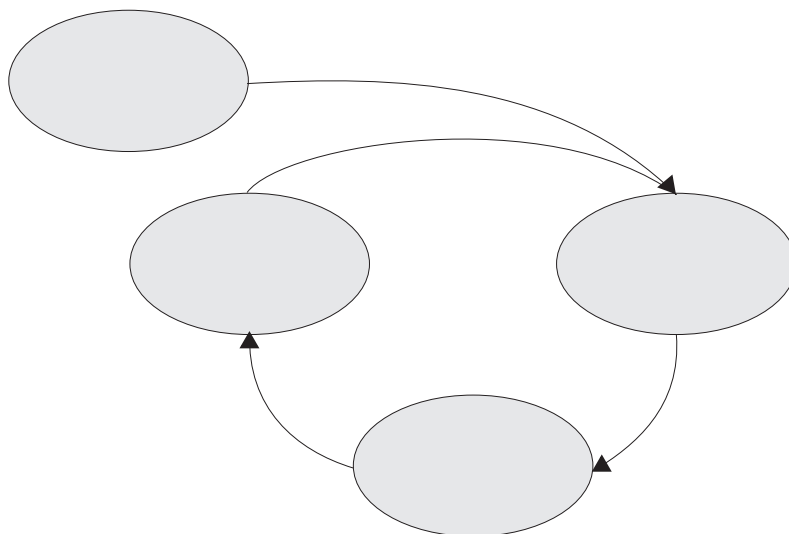


Figure 1. Tuckman's model of group's development

According to this model, the forming stage in Tuckman's is the same group formation stage presented by the already mentioned researchers. In this stage members of the group know each other and break the ice; the role of the teacher is to promote a friendly atmosphere, manage group anxiety, clarify group goals and project group enthusiasm for the groups. In this step, group members are dependent on the leader. Wheelan(1994) points out that at this stage politeness, tentativeness and deference to authority are typical features of group formation.

Next stage proposed is transition; it is the phase where group members feel free to enter in arguments, conflicts and debates. Some members feel free to express their opinions, ideas

and they maybe cannot be well-received by others. It is an inevitable and necessary stage that makes group stronger because at the end they realize that new alternatives and solutions are needed and also that if they have good communication skills, disagreements can be expressed and processed naturally; therefore a new feeling of trust supportiveness and commitment to the group emerges.

Ehrman and Dörnyei (1998:129, cited in Dörnyei, Z. and Murphy, T., 2003) point out that "through airing and openly discussing bottled-up issues, through making comments, and through the frequent use" "ought tos" and "shoulds" a new awareness of standards, shared values and mutual expectations may evolve and new rule/norms may be adopted. Thus the "storming" and the "norming" processes in classroom settings usually go hand in hand, and if properly handled, can lead to the development of trust, and increase cohesiveness." It can be deduced that the sub stages of the transition phase can be the storming and norming as natural part of the process but condensed in one.

The performing stage is characterized by an increase in motivation and task cooperation and decreased emotionality; it means that they are more conscious about the tasks to be performed than the way they are perceived in the group, it has developed a more well-defined internal structure that includes agreement on norms, roles and decision-making procedures; the group has reached maturity which enables it to perform as a unit and focus the majority of its energies on accomplishing desired goals. The quantity and quality of work increases during this phase although the emotional aspect decreases, the group channels all the energies to accomplish the tasks with responsibility, trust and commitment.

Dissolution or adjourning stage in Tuckman's words is considered as the time to look back and evaluate what has been done and try to find strengths and weaknesses to have a better process next time. It is where the level of achievement is analyzed and interpreted because it is very important to learn from lived experiences and to apply that learning into our behaviors. In this sense, group members need to see what to do with the experience and knowledge they have gained and to plan future goals and challenges whether inside and outside the group.

The previous stages represent like the life of a group; it can be compared to an alive being process: birth, growth, reproduction and death. Each one of them involves some characteristic situations which a group can go through. Among the aspects groups need to take into account to develop an engaging and productive work are the next: group structure (size, norms, roles), group goals, group cohesion, group interdependence and group interaction; all of them are closely related and allow group members to feel they are part of a team.

Another meaningful characteristic of group work to be successful is collaboration or cooperation among members. The next paragraphs are going to show some gaining of developing group work in a collaborative way.

Collaborative group work

There are a lot of benefits of working collaboratively according to Panitz (1996). I have designed the following graph to display Panitz' ideas of some of the advantages collaborative group work has.

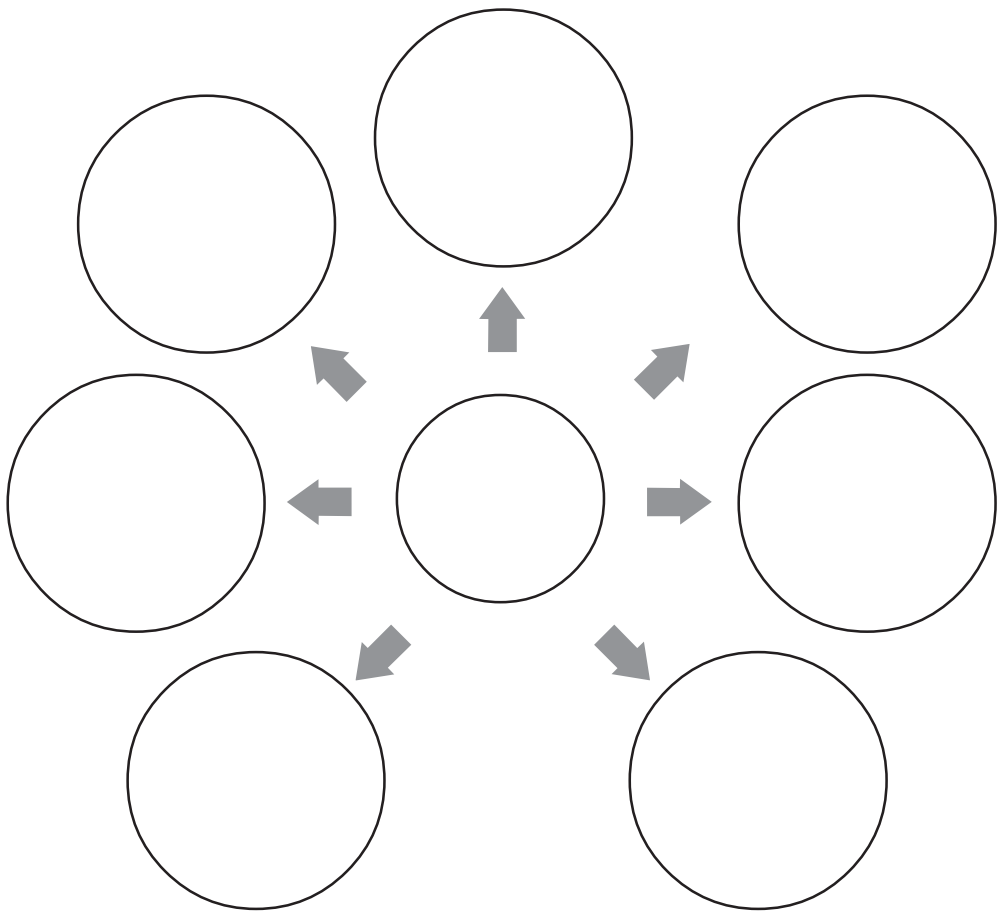


Figure 2. Benefits of working collaboratively. (Adapted from Panitz' ideas, 1996).

All the benefits presented in the next figure help practitioners to be better group workers what in turn promote the development of different skills, values and behaviors that favor the achievement of objectives not only as members of a group but also as individuals or members of a society. Collaborative group work promotes healthy learning environments where members can establish appropriate interpersonal relationships with the development of different skills and values such as responsibility, respect, tolerance, acceptance, positive attitudes toward learning, empathy, and so on.

Group members may experience the satisfaction of working with others, without losing their perspectives and individuality and moreover, having the opportunity to gain more enriching things like the reinforcement of self-esteem, the development of communicative skills and the ability to solve problems; collaborative work also gives the chance of enjoying the learning experience while acquiring and building new knowledge.

As collaboration is considered a significant issue in group work according to the studies by Aronson, Johnson & Johnson, Kagan, Slavin, and others since the early 1970s; I am going to present some considerations and research studies carried out by implementing this approach and the results in relation to language learning.

Collaborative group work and language learning

There are other researches that have shared and published their valuable experiences and outcomes about this topic. For instance, Viljo kohonen (2001) states that "work in collaborative learning teams is structured so that there is positive interdependence among the members in the group: the learners feel that they work together for mutual benefit." "In a well-functioning group there is a sense of joint responsibility where learners care about and get committed at each others' success as well as their own; a sense of "sinking or swimming together."

A team environment where learners provide assistance to each other, especially when they are learning a foreign language promotes more positive peer relationships, social support and partly, for that reason higher self-esteem and academic achievement.

Another study that deserves to be mentioned here is the one conducted by McGroarty (1993) which shows that group work benefits second language learners in three ways: input, interaction and contextualization of knowledge. When students work in small groups, they are more apt to receive input that is only slightly beyond their current level of competence and their interaction is much greater. Group tasks allow students to develop academic language and content knowledge together as they solve problems.

The previous considerations can be connected to Vygotsky's zone of proximal development which is defined as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers." (Vygotsky, 1978:86). Through the assistance of others, a learner may be able to achieve much more than learning by themselves. The ZPD represents a place where the learner is challenged enough to do the tasks with the guidance of more competent peers until the learner learns how to do or understand them on his/her own. Thus, the emphasis of this learning strategy is put on collaboration and that is why this concept plays an implicit role in group work in connection with the rest of issues equally important for individuals as members of a group.

These ideas can be complemented with what Rigg and Allen (1989) point out about learning a language "it means learning to do things you want to do with people who speak that language." When students share their ideas and their knowledge in social settings, individual concepts are developed within a social context. In collaborative classrooms students learn to value one another as they learn from one another. Collaborative learning is a tool teachers can use to promote collaboration between students and teachers to achieve the objectives or goals. Likewise, Gerdy (1998) states that "learning is enhanced when it is more like a team effort than a solo race. Good learning, like good work, is collaborative and social, not competitive and isolated. Sharing one's ideas and responding to others' improves thinking and deepens understanding". It means that students abilities and contributions are respected and relevant; the ongoing exchange of ideas, opinions and thoughts generates a relaxed setting where learners may express by themselves and at the same time, are able to respect opposite concepts and are also able to construct meaning from the difference.

Working together also helps language development because students have the opportunity to use the language for a variety of purposes. Thus, collaboration in group work is a tool that allows people to interact and to learn in an exploring environment where students are the main characters. The list of authors working on the topic is wide, but I hope that at this point the reader has a clearer idea of these concepts, then I will continue with the presentation of some group work activities considered to be useful in and out the classroom.

Group work activities

I am completely sure that, as language teachers, most of us, at any time, have had the opportunity to incorporate classroom activities where our students need to get in groups in

order to solve or develop them. In this part of the paper I would like to mention some of the activities I have practiced by myself and others taken from the Penny Ur book (1990) "Discussions that work" which are cited by Marlene Ramírez Salas in her article "Grouping techniques in a EFL classroom." The list includes activities like project works, where the students select a topic to work on, having in mind their interests and likes and begin exploring the issues based on a research question that synthesizes the problem. This is a kind of activity where students have the chance to interact, discuss, analyze, communicate or solve problems in an atmosphere created by themselves and where they are willing to achieve common established goals and responsibilities.

Other group activities that can be incorporated and promoted in the classroom, and where students have the opportunity to develop different skills and values through the interaction in group work are: discussions, debates, problem-solving situations, simulations, role plays, news forecast, creation of a story, fashion show, talk show, dramatization, creation of a survey or interview, information gap activities / jigsaws, board games and concentration games, writing a classified ad, an obituary, a letter to the editor, projects (collages, advertisements, fund raising campaigns, planning a trip or party), detecting differences from pictures, and so on.

It is advisable for teachers to select these activities based on their own circumstances, that is to say, depending on the topic being studied, on the kind of group and the time they have to carry them out. Teachers also need to be aware of the good preparation and organization of all the issues regarding roles, processes, characteristics or conditions we have discussed throughout this paper and that may be useful to guarantee the success of the tasks.

Nevertheless, group work has some implications at the time to be implemented, and they are the aspects that are going to be presented in the next paragraphs.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

According to what has been discussed in the previous sections, there are some aspects of group work that need to be highlighted so that its users may take advantage of its benefits and likewise may pay special attention to the disadvantages it may have and the way to overcome them.

- u Group work gives students more chance to interact and use the target language more freely. Students can participate longer in a small group and feel more confident to give their opinions and even make mistakes when just three or four classmates are looking at them.

- u Group work provides the space for individuals to learn in a more meaningful way because they can work on appealing, contextualized and relevant topics; it also promotes an active and exploratory learning.
- u Group work creates a positive atmosphere where students feel secure to express their opinions, ideas or thoughts, especially those who are afraid of facing large groups, or being exposed to public display. Learner's responsibility and autonomy are encouraged through group work. Students know that they are able to complete the activities by themselves, otherwise, they also know that there are people who they can count on. "The small group becomes a community of learners cooperating with each other in pursuit of common goals" (Brown, 2001:178).
- u Group work supports and reinforces the individual abilities members have to accomplish a task. In this way, learners can participate by doing what they like or are very good at, for example, drawing, writing, reporting, among others. Every person has his/her own talents, ideas, opinions and it makes him/her different; likewise they learn to respect others' perspectives.
- u Collaboration is a fundamental aspect of group work and their benefits or results for the practitioners can be very rewarding as group members or community members.
- u Although all the groups experience some development stages, it is important to remember that those processes help group members to become stronger, more organized and able to face and solve problems.
- u Evaluation of the process help students to clarify ideas about better ways to get the most of group work accepting and valuing different viewpoints; they are also able to deal with conflicts through dialogue and discussion as the main way to solve them.
- u Group work facilitates the development of communication among members and enables them to know better their self and to try to develop personal characteristics as confidence in themselves and in the others, because students are less dependent on the teacher when they work collectively with friends.
- u There are some negative factors that need to be considered when implementing group work; they deal with noise, discipline and the use of the native language and lack of correction when discussing or carrying out the tasks. However, it depends on the teachers or leaders' abilities to handle with these common situations. In the case of noise, it is

important to make students aware that they do not need to shout to be heard; in the case of discipline, if a teacher circulates around the class to clarify doubts and to monitor what students are doing, there is no reason for losing control of the class; and finally, in the case of native language use; it is important to raise awareness of the necessity to use the English language to accomplish all the tasks and the opportunity they have to use the language in real settings.

Finally, we, as human beings, frequently negotiate, discuss, share, suggest, help, and get results in our real lives, and one possibility to bring this reality to our language classes is the use of group work, so why don't we, teachers, take advantage of this resource that, when used appropriately, lead learners to bridge the gap between expectations and realities.

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