Group Work Strategies in ESP Classes

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Abstract

This paper discusses several issues concerning classroom management and the importance of group work strategies in ESP classes, such as classroom space and seating arrangements, discipline and students' behavior, verbal and nonverbal communication, classroom routines and procedures, organizing the material, etc. The second part of the paper proposes a type of research to be implemented in the following academic year, with students majoring in Economic Sciences, based on the hypothesis that appropriate, flexible and modern group strategies implemented and continuously adjusted in ESP classes will enhance the students' learning, entailing an evident development of their ESP skills.

Key words: group work strategies, ESP classroom, classroom arrangement, classroom discipline, nonverbal communication
J.E.L. classification: Z12

1. Introduction

According to the literature, classroom management can enhance student learning, acquisition or construction of knowledge, skills development, creating an inspiring environment for high quality teaching and learning in close to real-life situations. It relies on strategies that create and maintain an orderly learning environment. It is also connected to, and influenced by teacher's and students' motivation, discipline, attitudes, behavior. Thus, when it comes to ESP teaching, English language courses need contextualization, in accordance with the students' field of study, as the latter should be able to relate the taught ESP content to their prospective workplace (Nadrag, 2020, p. 446).

Both scholars and practitioners in the field agree that well-trained teachers must be able to use the best strategies and techniques, have good planning and organizing skills. They should know how to motivate and get students interested in a large array of topics, and prevent their lack of attention especially by resorting to group work activities connected to their field of study. Furthermore, it is widely professed that well-defined rules in the classroom can prevent many attitudinal, behavior-related difficulties. Classroom management includes thus elements of classroom discipline, and focuses on creating a peaceful, engaging, relaxed, comfortable, well-organized, learning environment.

2. Theoretical background

Definitions as well as the importance and roles of classroom management are shown in different books and articles. For example, Tony Wright mentions the key roles of establishing and maintaining order in the classroom; providing learning opportunities; creating a context of care. Jonathan Ryan Davis (2018) describes "The Dynamic Classroom Management Approach" (DCMA), its major four principles, and the ways of its integration into a methods course. The first principle mentioned by this scholar refers to the resilience and versatility that should characterize an efficient management style. The second principle relates to the learners' various environments and particularities, such as "culture, socioeconomic status, gender/sexuality, language background, and ability". The principle professes for the establishment of competent and adequate pedagogy rooted in "course, unit, and lesson design, lesson implementation, and behavioral management". As

far as the last principle is concerned, it professes for the engenderment "of a positive classroom culture and community rooted in solid relationships, high expectations, and a safe/nurturing environment".

In their turn, Froyen and Iverson (1999) emphasize the key role played by school and classroom management and highlight their aims of engendering and boosting student self-control and independence via positive student performance and behavior. These scholars conclude that the concepts of, and the strategies related to school and classroom management are tightly connected to factors such as academic performance, teacher competence and teacher and student behavior, which should be envisaged in the design of classroom activities.

Johannes König and Charlotte Kramer (2015) discussed the amount of information that can be provided by using "a specific video-based measurement of teachers' classroom management expertise". Thus, these scholars applied "the general pedagogical knowledge test" that had been earlier designed in the *Teacher Education and Development Study—Mathematics* (TEDS-M). This test includes items such as knowledge of lesson structure, student motivation, classroom management, flexibility, adaptivity when tackling heterogeneous learning groups, student assessment. The scholars' findings evidenced that, despite being positively interconnected, "classroom management expertise can be empirically separated from general pedagogical knowledge". In addition, the pedagogical knowledge of classroom management – compared to that of 'adaptivity', 'structure', and 'assessment' – correlates in a higher manner with classroom management expertise. In its turn, the latter shows a greater penchant towards correlations with procedural pedagogical knowledge to the detriment of declarative pedagogical knowledge. The above-mentioned scholars also evidenced that expert teachers surpass both beginner teachers and advanced beginners, and that classroom management expertise – rather than general pedagogical knowledge – foresees in a stronger manner the instructional quality elements of classroom management (König and Kramer, 2015).

According to Doyle (1986), classroom management has two goals. It must establish a calm environment, so that the students can take part in meaningful learning, and it must contribute to developing students' social and moral competence. The classroom environment ensures both a context for learning including the physical space, furniture, resources and teaching aids, and also the class atmosphere, participants' attitudes, emotions, behavior, and the social dynamics of the learning experience.

As far as the composition of classroom management is concerned, one can notice items such as classroom space and seating arrangements, discipline and students' behavior, verbal and nonverbal communication, classroom routines and procedures, organizing the material, and so on. Considering the student-centered approach, and the aim of preparing students both for real life situations and prospective jobs, the focus should fall on showing students how to learn by endowing them with efficient and adequate learning strategies. According to Daniels (1998), in order to learn in a successful manner, students should be given opportunities to participate actively in the learning process, they should be able to appropriately understand and analyze facts, to generalize, organize and adjust the received information in an accessible manner. Furthermore, the above-mentioned scholar explains that a positive learning context should be delineated by a clearly delineated physical arrangement (which involves, among others, the organization of classroom furniture and the location of teaching areas), having in view the students' learning needs and the activities designed for the respective lessons; this facilitates classroom routines and procedures as it enables students to foresee and prepare for the activities designed to be carried out in every area, which encourages their active participation, contributes to the enhancement of their positive attitudes and discourages possible misbehavior (see Daniels, 1998).

Practice and experience have shown that in the teaching process, besides the various patterns of classroom arrangement, the teacher can resort to other strategies, in order to discourage, disapprove or stop student misbehavior, such as various forms of verbal intervention (e.g. calling on the student, private or public reminder, warning of consequences), teacher proximity, different hand signals, facial expressions which convey disapproval, confiscation of forbidden items (e.g. telephones, toys). Other non-verbal communication elements (i.e., voice tone, volume, pitch, timbre and pace, pauses, eye contact and movements, body language) also play an essential role in the teaching process.

In Garrett's view (2014), more serious classroom misbehavior should be counteracted by imposing an efficient consequence, which should be reasonably connected to the respective misbehavior. Nevertheless, the scholar explains that difference should be made between consequences – which are somewhat more protruding and should thus be implemented only in case of more severe misbehavior – and interventions (which can be employed with little or no interruption of a lesson). The aforementioned scholar professes for the need to envisage a hierarchy of consequences (ranging from warnings to sending the disruptive student to the principal) that will enable teachers to take different consistent yet adaptable measures, depending on the context and on the student.

Often, teachers have to manage a limited physical space where not all ideas and activities can be implemented. In this regard, Daniels (1998) explains that, when designing the lesson, teachers should take into account a wide array of elements, such as visibility (i.e., all students should be able to see all the displays and all the items projected, as well as the whiteboard/blackboard), accessibility (i.e., ensuring the students' access to high traffic areas and to all the materials they need), distractibility (i.e., removing the disturbing elements from the classroom and reducing as much as possible the occurrence of possible distractions, by adequate desk arrangement). An appropriate physical arrangement teaches students to observe physical boundaries (in particular such as those between students' and teacher's space, individual or group work areas), to acknowledge and respect – in general – other people's spaces and property, and to foresee the particular activities designed for the implementation in certain classroom areas, being thus more actively involved (with a mind-set in line with the foreseen activity) and preventing misbehavior (usually triggered when students are unprepared or when they inaccurately foresee the activities planned for the respective lesson).

Both scholars and practitioners in the field emphasize the fact that it is vital that classroom arrangement be envisaged by teachers as a flexible and adjustable element that can be modified whenever necessary, according to the students' needs and to the aims of the activities designed for each lesson. Desks, classroom library, various activity centers, group work areas, whole class meeting area can be adjusted or rearranged in a favorable manner whenever deemed appropriate, whenever the teacher notices any flaws in the existing physical arrangement (see Bennett and Blundle, 1983).

There are several well-known classroom arrangement patterns that have been tested and discussed by various scholars in the field, who also highlighted the main advantages and drawbacks of such arrangements. For instance, Bennett and Blundle (1983) consider that traditional rows improve the students' behavior especially when performing individual tasks, as this pattern underlines the idea that the teacher – situated in this case in front of the class – represents both the authority and the source of knowledge, facilitating his/ her movements around, and control over the class. The aforementioned scholars further explain that less distracted students, a better view of the students' facial expressions and gestures (which reveals whether they pay attention or whether they understand the teacher's explanations) and less space are other advantages of the traditional row pattern, according to the above-mentioned authors. Nevertheless, the same scholars explain that this arrangement type triggers some significant drawbacks, such as the likeliness of decreased engagement of the students sitting in the back rows, boredom, less efficiency in terms of classroom management (in case of more than two rows), the students' reluctance to sit in the front rows as some of them may thus feel exposed.

As far as the semicircle or the horseshoe pattern is concerned, Rosenfield et al. (1985) consider it as extremely efficient for classroom discussions, while Wannarka and Ruhl (2008: p.91) recommend it for interactive activities, such as brainstorming or questioning. Among the advantages triggered by this arrangement type, scholars highlight the fact that it is ideal for small spaces (as it facilitates the teacher's movements around the class), it helps teachers grasp students' attention, everybody can see very well the person situated in the center and talking to the class (which is ideal for class discussions or debated) or the items projected on the wall or on the whiteboard. The students' active participation and attentiveness is enhanced and maintained for a longer period and they do not need to move around the class too much when required to work together. Nevertheless, overcrowding, difficulty in addressing to all the students, cumbersome implementation of individual and small group work, distracted attention are

some of the disadvantages of the semicircle pattern outlined by teachers and scholars in the field.

In his turn, Harmer (1998) professes that pair and group patterns enhance the students' independence and equal participation (although it is also possible to encourage one student's domination when the others in the group are more silent or unwilling to cooperate in order to solve the assigned tasks). Facilitated teacher movements around the class, boosted cooperative learning, collaborative work and responsibility for one's actions and behaviors are several advantages of the pair or group work, emphasized by the scholars and practitioners in the field. However, one should also be aware of the disadvantages entailed by such classroom arrangements, such as distraction and off-task behavior, the teacher often spending too much time to redirect the students' attention to the tasks.

Having in view the advantages and the drawbacks of various types of classroom arrangements presented above, it is evident that there is no perfect solution and that the teacher should adjust these patterns based on the aims of the activities, on the classroom space and on the students' personality, behavior, level of abilities and learning needs.

3. Research methodology

The research based on the theoretical elements discussed in the previous sections of this paper is designed to be conducted in the second semester of the academic year 2022-2023, on two groups of students majoring in International Business.

The research will test the following hypothesis:

Appropriate, flexible and modern group strategies implemented in ESP classes will enhance the students' learning, entailing an evident development of their ESP skills.

For the implementation of this research, the observation method and the experiment will be used, followed by a survey (focused on the students' attitudes towards the implementation of modern group strategies) applied to the experimental group.

The experiment will consist of several stages: the initial test, the teaching process, the final test and the analysis of the data provided by the test results and by the observation method. This analysis will afterwards be corroborated with the data furnished by the survey.

The main role of the initial test is to determine the students' ESP proficiency level so as to establish the two research groups, i.e., the experiment and the control groups, which should be similar in terms of the students' ESP skills, in order to ensure the validity of the results.

The teaching process will last four weeks and it will be focused on teaching the following units to both groups: "Organizations", "The career ladder", "Managers, executives and directors", "Business people and business leaders". Some of the teaching materials that will be employed in this stage will be based on "Business Vocabulary in Use" by Bill Mascull (Cambridge University Press, 2002), "Check Your English Vocabulary for Business and Administration" by Rawdon Wyatt (London: A&C Black, 2007) and Career Paths: Business English by John Taylor and Jeff Zetter (Newbury: Express Publishing, 2011). After deciding on the vocabulary, function, or grammatical elements upon which the activity will focus, pre-task and post-task activities will be designed; for complex activities, worksheets will also be furnished to students (see Nadrag, 2018, p. 320).

In order to test the validity of the research hypothesis, traditional group strategies will be used with the control group, with no change during the teaching process, while the experimental group will undergo student-centered and modern group strategies, that enhance direct interactions between students, focus on exploratory discussions, encourage students to engage in conversations, etc. Moreover, with the experimental group, the employed strategies will be adapted to the students' learning needs and will be continuously adjusted, depending on the students' reactions and participation during the teaching process.

During the teaching period, the observation method will provide data on the students' progress and attitudes towards the employed group strategies in each group involved within the experiment. These data will be corroborated with the final test results and with the information provided by the survey.

At the end of the teaching period, the students from both groups will sit for a final test aimed at assessing their ESP knowledge and skills acquired during the respective period. These results will be graphically represented and compared to the scores obtained by students in the initial test, in order to establish whether any progress has been made as far as their ESP skills are concerned. Moreover, the scores obtained by the students in the control group will be compared to those from the experimental group in order to determine if the implementation of modern group strategies has contributed in any way to the development of the students' ESP skills. At this interpretation stage, the information provided by the observation method will also be taken into consideration, as well as that furnished by the survey focused on the students' attitudes towards the use of modern and flexible group strategies.

4. Findings

We expect that the students from the experimental group will obtain higher scores at the final test, compared to those from the control group. Moreover, we also predict (according to the data furnished by the observation method) that the students from the experimental group will involve more actively in, and will show more interest towards the ESP activities due to the modern group strategies employed.

We also suppose (from the information provided by the survey) that the students from the experimental group will consider the modern group strategies employed in the ESP class as more attractive, entertaining and stimulating.

Thus, we expect that the students' scores obtained at the initial and final tests, corroborated with the data provided by the observation method and the survey will validate the research hypothesis according to which modern and flexible group strategies implemented in ESP classes enhance the students' learning, entailing an evident development of their ESP skills.

5. Conclusions

An efficient teaching process is underlain by the employment of adequate classroom management strategies that promote student-centered teaching and enhance the interactions between students and their involvement in conversations on various topics, depending on the content approached in the ESP/ EFL class. Enriched linguistic resources and increased confidence are some other benefits entailed by such strategies. Therefore, teachers should be encouraged to employ a wide array of student-centered strategies and even adjust them, depending on the taught content, on the teaching context and also on the students' English proficiency level, on their needs and also on their feedback.

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