

SOME ISSUES SOLUTIONS IN MANAGING AND EVALUATING STUDENTS' TEAMWORK AT FOREIGN TRADE UNIVERSITY, HO CHI MINH CITY CAMPUS

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ABSTRACT

One of the factors influencing the productivity of students' teamwork is instructors' team management. Since lecturers working at English Department of Foreign Trade University, Ho Chi Minh City Campus always have students work in teams, they have quite a lot of experience in team management. The articles is about some of the English lecturers' difficulties in managing teams and suggests some practical solutions with specific step-by-step guidelines to contribute to more effective and time-saving team management.

Keywords: teamwork (group work), team management, team leader, team member.

TÓM TẮT

Một số vấn đề về giải pháp và đánh giá quản lý nhóm sinh viên Đại học Ngoại thương, Cơ sở II tại Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh

Một trong những nhân tố ảnh hưởng đến hiệu quả làm việc nhóm của sinh viên là cách quản lý nhóm của giảng viên. Giảng viên Bộ môn tiếng Anh của Cơ sở II Đại học Ngoại thương tại Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh thường xuyên cho sinh viên làm việc theo nhóm, vì vậy, họ có nhiều kinh nghiệm trong việc quản lý nhóm. Bài viết nêu những khó khăn trong việc quản lý nhóm của giảng viên Bộ môn tiếng Anh, từ đó đề xuất một số biện pháp quản lý nhóm cụ thể theo từng công đoạn nhằm nâng cao hiệu quả và tiết kiệm thời gian.

Từ khóa: làm việc nhóm, quản lý nhóm, trưởng nhóm, thành viên nhóm.

1. Introduction

Realizing the vital role of teamwork, teachers of English subjects at Foreign Trade University on Ho Chi Minh City Campus (FTU2) have widely applied it to their lessons; yet its productivity is still a question. In a department-level conference titled 'Managing students' teamwork' held by English Department in the early 2012, it was admitted that there had been a lot of difficulty in examining the contribution

of group members individually; thus it was difficult to evaluate them. Certainly one of the factors affecting the effectiveness of students' teamwork is teachers' management. In the conference, some shortcomings in managing teams were admitted and these led to an unsatisfactory outcome. Also, because of different contribution among team members, giving an equal score to everyone in a team, in many circumstances, discouraged devoted students. This study attempts to examine some issues in managing students' teamwork of English-teaching lecturers at

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English Department, FTU2 and accordingly suggests some practical solutions to the problems.

2. The importance of teamwork and the roles of teachers in managing students' teamwork

Richard and Nunan (1987) stated that working in teams gave students chance to talk freely, and that this improved their language skills. Teachers should put students in teams and give them plenty of practice through relevant and authentic language activities. Slavin (1990) stated that working in multi-level teams could help both high and lowlevel students a lot in studying subject aspects. Jacques (1991) added that while working in teams, students had chance to take risks in showing and examining new behaviors. It was also advised that teachers used a range of teaching strategies that would enhance students' active participation in teamwork.

According to Good, T.et.al (1994), teachers were more interested in the potential of collaborative small teams to help students gain more active learning and resolving differences among students in classroom activities. Moreover, teachers could contribute to the usefulness of teamwork by interpreting the task and having students actively achieve its goals and study related procedures before moving into small teams.

Teamwork includes differentiation of tasks at the same time. Stradling and Saunders (1993) suggested that these differentiated teams be formed to match

learning targets, tasks, activities, resources, and students' different abilities, interests and learning styles. Nunan (1991) recommended that teachers should be aware of the process of forming groups such as the team kinds and sizes, and the classroom settings. It was also said that a hard working team conveyed a sense of achievement. Thus, teamwork could develop qualities such as tolerance, team spirit, giving and taking, and the ability of setting up goals. Additionally, it improved critical and creative thinking, and strengthened an informed mind, and sense of enjoyment in life-long learning.

Nair (2012) stated that teamwork could help multi-ability classes. To overcome their own problems, groups can be formed according to skills, interests, abilities, achievements, purposes for tasks and selections of materials. Putting students who can work well together will effect on the task completion and the interactions between them. The fact is that teachers should be aware of the various kinds of teams according to the purposes of the task.

Blumenfeld (1992) noted that even though students found teamwork more motivating and enjoyable, active learning decreased during teamwork. According to Sellaodayan (1988), motivation is crucial for any effective learning outcomes. Nevertheless, there could be problems in moderating teamwork, especially if teams are not willing to work cooperatively by themselves without teachers. Furthermore, the

management of teams when it came to such issues as who were team members, how many members were included might cause difficulties which had to be resolved. Thus, teachers should be both a facilitator and supervisor of students' teamwork.

3. Teamwork activities in English lessons at FTU2

At FTU2 , teamwork is practiced in all English subjects and for all the students from freshmen to seniors. There are team games, team writing or team case study. Also, there are teams' tutorials, team papers and presentations regarded as the midterm or final tests.

4. Problems in managing and evaluating students' teamwork

In order to investigate problems in managing and evaluating students' teamwork, five lecturers from English

Department have been interviewed. At the time of the interview, these lecturers had at least two year experience in teaching English subjects. Their students were all freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors, and the subjects taught were various such as Business Communication, Commercial Correspondence, English for Specific Purposes and English Presentations.

The interview focused on investigating:

- The lecturers' problems in managing and evaluating students' teamwork
- The lecturers' experience in managing and evaluating students' teamwork

The results are displayed in the following table:

| No. | Questions asked | Responses | Percentage of responses |
|-----|--|--|---|
| 1 | What are main problems in managing and evaluating teamwork? | Big size classes and big size groups | 100% |
| | | Lack in time | 80% |
| 2 | What is some experience in managing and evaluating teamwork? | Using technologies | Emails (100%) Phone calls (100%) Skype (60%) Viber (20%) |
| | | Grading the team leader higher than the others | 20% |
| | | Grading every team member equally | 80% |

As can be seen from the table, in terms of problems in managing and evaluating students' teamwork, all of the five lecturers agreed that because of big size classes (which range from 35 to 50

students), it was difficult to classify students to put them in teams. Also, the high number of members in each group (from 5 to 10) made it hard for teachers to manage and grade them. In addition,

four out of five teachers claimed that they could not keep in touch with the students often because of the lack in time. On average, each of them had to teach roughly 1000 hours in an academic year. Besides, they had to do a lot of paperwork related to research and administration at the university, so they could not closely manage each team and separately give a careful evaluation to each team member based on their contribution and performance.

In terms of their experience in managing and evaluating students' teamwork, all of them stated that they always tried to make improvements by sparing more time for students and take advantage of technologies like emails, Skype and Viber to contact them. Also, one out of five made it fairer by rewarding the team leader with higher marks although sometimes it appears to be unwilling to other team members.

5. Some suggested solutions to manage students' teamwork

5.1. Forming the teams

First, teachers should let students choose the ways of assigning members to the teams by either teachers or students. This is because some students prefer working with the ones that they frequently work with or have the same schooling schedule) while others would like to have teachers do it or else this will lead to a high distinction among teams. It may also because they would like to work with new peers who can share with them different experiences but they dare not to have a voice. Whatever students

might choose, a deadline for any changes in teams' human resources should be given beforehand. In addition, teachers should manage in a way that teams should be mixed with superior and inferior students and should not be extreme with only higher-level or only lower-level ones.

Teams' size should depend on the amount of work and the deadline; however, teams should not be too small (because if one drops out, the others cannot work well), and should not be too big (normally it takes more time to assign tasks, discuss and reach an agreement). Second, students should be instructed how to choose team leaders, who are not necessarily the best students but are good at team leadership and management. Team leaders can be chosen by teachers or team members. If it is a long-lasting and challenging task, there is not necessarily one team leader. There can be more than one team leader who can switch roles through different periods. Third, a bibliography should be prepared with teachers' help. Teachers should provide students with books' titles or internet links so that they will not be overwhelmed with too much information and too much time spent on searching for reference materials.

5.2. Organising the work

First, tasks should be assigned as soon as possible, even from the start of the course. Thus, students will have more time processing tasks. Second, before students start to do tasks, they should do the following:

5.2.1. Setting up a goal: This can be done by a self-questionnaire provided by teachers. The answers should be submitted to teachers in advance, and teachers will give feedback. This very much contributes to the teams' success. Here is an example.

1. Who are we talking to?
 2. What do they expect from our presentation?
 3. What message is the most suitable to them?
 4. What is our goal? What will the audience benefit from it?
 5. What information will be included? How do we present them? What examples should be included?
 6. What do we do to get them involved during the presentation?
 7. What is our team's target score?
- (The author's guidance questionnaire – Presentation Module in the subject Foreign Language 3).

5.2.2. Prepare a detailed schedule and timetable in which specify who will do what and deadlines for each item. Basing on these, teams are supposed to submit completed work items to teachers and they will be examined and modified in time. For example, in the Presentation Module given above, three deadlines are determined: one for the completed questionnaire, one for the outline of the presentation and one for the full content of the presentation. Teachers keep in touch with teams so that modification, correction and improvement can continually be made. This also helps both teachers and teams save time and reduce

workload.

5.3. Supervising the work

By using technologies like emails, Skype or Viber, teamwork can be closely supervised without spending too much time. Teams should be asked to send periodical reports with difficulties that need helping.

5.4. Evaluating and grading

“Assessment is an integral part of instruction, as it determines whether or not the goals of education are being met” (Edutopia Staff, 2008). To the author's experience, young students like to get comments from teachers so that they know their strengths and weaknesses and can improve themselves. As mentioned in part 3, lacking time is one of teachers' main problems; thus, to save time, assessment can be sent later via emails.

Part of assessment is grading. It is agreed by the interviewees that since the contribution to the team is different among students, they should not be given with equal scores which can weaken their responsibility towards the common work and negatively affect the productivity. Here are some suggested options to grade them:

5.4.1. After tasks have been fulfilled, each team will be given a self-assessment note (with criteria announced by teachers from the start) which includes students' self-grading and notice of outstanding members. If it is a presentation, teams are also asked to use this note to grade each other. Referring to students' mutual grading, the final score will be decided by teachers. The following is a sample of a self-assessment note:

SELF-ASSESSMENT NOTE

Put a cross (x) in the most appropriate box

| Standards | Excellent | Very Good | Good | Fair | Average | Weak |
|--|------------------|------------------|-------------|-------------|----------------|-------------|
| Content (GOAL achieving) | | | | | | |
| Way of delivery (Application of techniques learnt, body language) | | | | | | |
| Time management | | | | | | |
| Voice (intonation, rhythm, stress) | | | | | | |
| Pronunciation | | | | | | |
| Group collaboration and interaction (when working and when delivering) | | | | | | |

Expected score:/10

Notice of outstanding members:

.....

(Adapted from The author’s ‘Self-assessment note’ – Presentation Module in the subject Foreign Language 3)

5.4.2. Basing on students’ self-assessment notes and mutual assessment notes, teachers can offer each team a ‘score package’ which is the total score they would like to give to teams. Teams then will discuss how to allocate the score package to each member. Certainly team leaders are the ones to give the final decision. For example, a score package of 42 marks is given to a 5-member team. After discussion, the result is that three members get 8 and two others get 9 because of their outstanding contribution. By doing this, the equality and fairness

among team members is strengthened.

6. Conclusion

If receiving good support from teachers, teamwork will be a useful way to combine students’ brainpower and creativity. It also provides chances for them to learn from each other and practice many skills like communication and problem-solving ones. On the contrary, if teachers lack enthusiasm and responsibility, teams will be like those walking all by themselves in a dark tunnel. Without teachers’ proper guidance, students will lose their direction and teamwork can be a frustrating experience to them. For these reasons, teachers should fully realize their roles in substantially contributing to each and every team’s success.

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