

Working with Anxiety in Group-based Learning Approaches

“There seems to be a lot of emphasis on social aspects, group work and it feels like it is taken for granted that everyone is really confident. It would be nice if there was more understanding that just being in a lecture theatre is a big achievement for some people.” Student Comment (Russel & Topham, 2012, p. 382)

Group-based learning in the classroom

Group work and pair work are common practices in language classrooms, with many activities designed to encourage student interaction.

Both Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) are grounded in the use of small groups in the classroom. (Leeming, 2012)

Group-based learning approaches assume students:

- + Feel at ease with the idea and processes of group work;
- + Possess the cognitive abilities and psychological attributes to function successfully in group work situations. (Cantwell and Andrews, 2002)

With learners who are reticent to participate or experience distress when in social situations, group-based learning approaches may create more obstacles to the learning process rather than aiding it.

Placing students who have feelings of anxiety directly into group learning contexts without due consideration can be detrimental not only to the individual students themselves, but also to the overall efficacy of the groups themselves.

Up to now, one of the primary concerns with regards to anxiety in the EFL context has been the anxiety associated with actually communicating in a foreign language.

With the wider adoption of group-based learning approaches in language learning classrooms, attention should be given to the role that anxiety plays in students’ attitudes towards group work.

Social Anxiety

A fear that occurs when people become concerned about how they are being perceived or evaluated by others. (Leary & Kowalski, 1997)

Forms of anxiety involving interpersonal evaluation, e.g., stage fright, shyness, audience anxiety, communication apprehension, or social-evaluative anxiety, can be subsumed under this construct. (Leary, 1982)

The primary difference between these expressions of anxiety is the social context in which the feelings of unease occur:

Contingent social situation: an individual’s responses depend upon others’ responses, e.g., a conversation or chance encounter

Noncontingent social situation: depend upon one’s plans and only minimally on others’ responses, e.g., public speaking (Leary, 1983)

The greater ambiguity and uncertainty found in contingent situations, such as group work, present more challenges to communication, are difficult for learners to deal with and therefore more anxiety provoking for socially anxious students. (Cowden, 2010; Kondo and Yang, 1994; Culotta and Goldstein, 2008)

Socially anxious learners tend not to be effective in group work, they:

- + Talk much less and participate less frequently;
- + Position themselves in the group to make withdrawal from communication easier;
- + Generate fewer ideas and avoid contributing to the discussion or expressing disagreement. (McCroskey & Richmond, 1992)

Anxious learners are often perceived as making less useful contributions, and can be rejected by the other members of the group.

Working with anxiety

Teachers need an awareness of factors that can impact students’ attitudes towards group work and means to limit their influence –

Learners experience more anxiety in novel or ambiguous situations, when working with unfamiliar people and in contingent social interactions. (Daly, 1991; Kondo, 2001)

Take time to build rapport between group members. (Young, 1991; Xethakis, 2017)

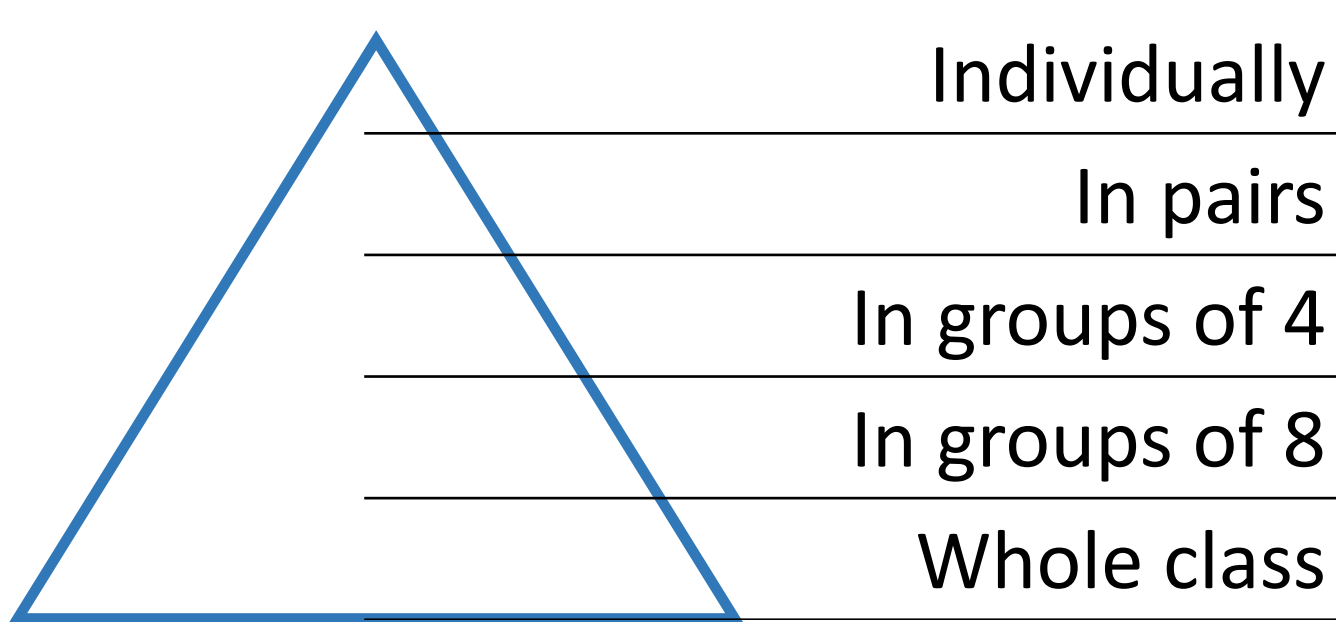
Promote acceptance by exchanging genuine information in low-risk self-disclosure activities. (King & Smith, 2012)

Reduce in-group / out-group distinctions by rearranging seating to encourage communication between all class members. (King & Smith, 2012)

Structured activities can help decrease anxiety by reducing contingency, encouraging interaction as well as cooperation.

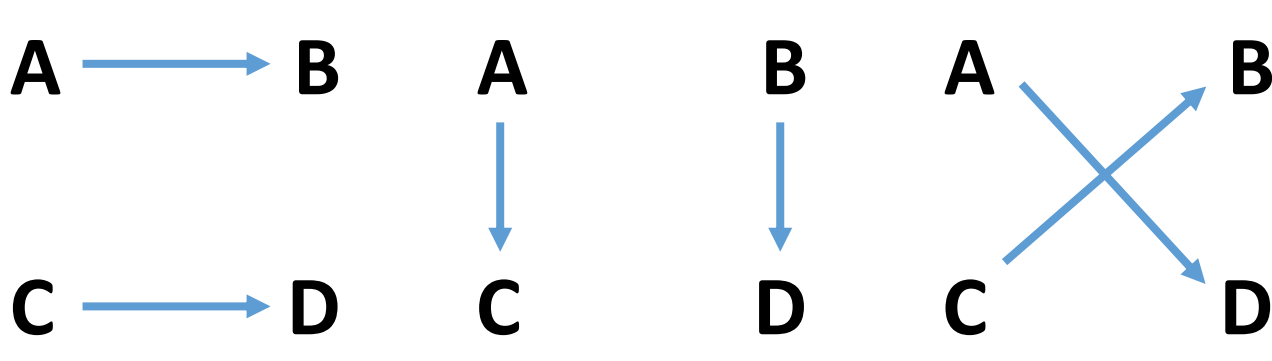
(Fanzuzzo et al, 1989; ; Xethakis, 2017)

A pyramid discussion is one example (Jordan, 1990)



Reduce ambiguity and novelty by assigning roles and repeating activities, e.g.,

- Three-step interview:



- 4 – 2 – 1 Speaking Activity
- Speed – Dating / Kaiten Sushi

The social context established by the teacher can have a powerful influence on learners. (Young, 1991)

Social anxiety is founded on a fear of negative evaluation – give approval to show students are *not* being negatively evaluated. (Watson & Friend, 1969)

Provide team-skills training. Even 90 minutes of training can be effective! (Prichard, Stratford and Bizo, 2006)

Learners won’t share ideas and opinions until they feel sure that the teacher or their peers won’t reject them. (King & Smith, 2012)

Learners need a psychologically safe and comfortable learning environment for language learning to take place. (Kebblowska, 2012)



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