Teaching language learners in mini groups:

an experiment with blended learning

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The context

Community is a word you often hear at the University of Chichester, not least in International English where, according to the 2020 Undergraduate Prospectus, "*Our international students tell us they love studying here because of our friendly and supportive community*" (p187). We promise "*You will develop close working relationships with your lecturers and fellow students and you will be taught in small groups*" (p191). In some programmes, 'small' may mean a group of 14 students; in others, perhaps just a handful.

It seems to me that a lot is written about teaching large groups (e.g. Scrivener, 2005:331) - managing and dividing them, interaction and behaviour in them, the stress of teaching them - and there is plenty of material on teaching one-to-one – the intensity and flexibility of this "*special teaching context*" (Harmer, 2007:122). Yet I have come across little on teaching very small groups.

Some thoughts on mini groups

According to Exley and Dennick (2004:2), "*the optimum size for small group teaching, in general, is between five and eight per group*". In their article *Teaching Mini Groups*, Moore and Kot (2018) do not define the size of their 'mini group', but for the purpose of this particular 'mini' project, it is just four students.

With both pros and cons, one-to-one teaching is "*teaching at its most distilled*" (Meddings & Thornbury, 2009:92). Mini groups certainly share some of the advantages of one-to-one teaching; perhaps the most obvious is the possibility of tailored teaching, in which real and ongoing needs analyses are undertaken and incorporated into a made-to-measure syllabus, increasing motivation as *"Learners may believe they are luckier to be in a smaller group […] and have higher expectations of more focused teacher input and a more negotiated, individualised programme"* (Moore & Kot, 2018).

One of the drawbacks is that a mini group is likely to be less varied. According to Exley and Dennick (2004:2), *"when group membership falls below five, the diversity and variety of interpersonal interaction diminishes"*. Harmer (2007:123) highlights another disadvantage in common with one-to-one teaching: it is that *"the dynamic of a crowded classroom is missing"*. This has made me reconsider my own views on classroom rapport and dynamics.

> "For magic to transpire in the language classroom, you need a healthy and consistent dose of solid rapport with your students and among the class" (Forrest, 2019).

Whilst I am someone who is not naturally quiet, and who enjoys the buzz of lively interactions in the classroom, I am also aware that this is not the case for everyone, and I try to remember that learning in a mini group means there is nowhere to hide. This may be particularly problematic for students who are already reluctant to participate. Furthermore, teaching a mini group may feel very different to working with larger groups. Moore and Kot (2018) suggest the *"need to adjust your expectations of what 'good dynamics' look like"* and *"You don't need fireworks for an effective mini group language learning experience"*.

My mini group

Having just four students in an undergraduate English language module for international students, I wanted to explore what would only work, or might work better, with a group of this size. The module aims to develop students' English by focussing on the content and language of a range of current affairs materials, and part of both the sessions and assessment involves presenting and discussing current affairs topics. Whilst previous groups in the module have been multilingual, chatty and ready to speak their mind, the students in this mini group

Image: outline of the Japanese archipelago superimposed on the national flag

are quieter, and reluctant to interrupt or disagree with one another. They are from the same country, Japan, they share the same first language and are the same age. More than that, none of them is an extrovert.

My experience of teaching Japanese students has often, though not always, reflected the observation by Thompson (in Swan & Smith, 2001:297) that

> "eloquent, fluent speech is not highly rated in Japan; indeed, it is often distrusted. Tentativeness is preferred to assertiveness, hesitancy to momentum".

He goes on to highlight a cultural distinction highly relevant to this particular module:

> "The Japanese tend not to air their private opinions in public, which means that 'What do you think of…?' topic discussions can be full of long and painful silences […] The uninhibited aggressive participation in multi-national discussions by many Europeans may affront the Japanese sense of propriety" (ibid, 2001:309).

Having considered the features of both mini groups and Japanese language learners, I felt that my mini group offered opportunities not to be missed.

An opportunity to try something new

Previous cohorts were sometimes asked to read abridged articles in class before sharing and discussing their texts with the group. This kind of jigsaw reading activity is popular in language classrooms and there are benefits in, for example, practising reading for gist. However, it necessarily requires students to read and process content quickly, and often means they have only a superficial understanding of the information before discussing the topic. By 'flipping' (Fig. 1) some of this work, the reading is done before class so that

"Flipped learning is a pedagogical approach in which the conventional notion of classroom-based learning is inverted, so that students are introduced to the learning material before class, with classroom time then being used to deepen understanding through discussion with peers and problem-solving activities facilitated by teachers" (HEA website, 2018).

Fig. 1: What is flipping?

students have the time they need to understand and process the texts. It also allows more time to discuss content and focus on emergent language during the class.

I also wanted to allow students more autonomy in their choice of reading material – to choose which articles to read and discuss. According to Meddings and Thornbury (2009:7), "*The content most likely to engage learners and to trigger learning processes is that which is already there, supplied by 'the people in the room'*". More specifically, Hedge proposes book groups or 'reading syndicates' that *"usefully combine the motivation of self-chosen books, genuine classroom interaction […] of learners, and potential student recommendation of books to their peers"* (Hedge, 2000:221). These suggestions also seem to support theories of social constructivism, which stress the importance of the social nature of learning (e.g. Vygotsky, as described in Cook, 2008:228).

Designing the activity

As Stannard (2016) points out, *"There is nothing essentially new about the flipped classroom, but what is so different now is just how many tools we have at our disposal to make the flip more interesting"*. I am always careful when deciding whether to introduce technology into an activity, mindful of a warning from a writer on blended learning: "*Make sure it links to the wider aims of your lessons, and that your students are actually learning as a result!"* (Hockly, 2018). However, moving this activity online would allow students to participate when and where they chose without the need to actually meet, so a number of options were considered, including OneNote Class Notebook and various features of Moodle, the University's online learning platform. The apparent complexity of enrolling students into a OneNote Classbook, as well as setting up its pages and becoming familiar with its format and use, led me to a decision that the Moodle forum would be the simplest method for both students to post and the tutors to monitor. Lengthy introductions or new accounts and logins

would not be needed because Moodle is already used by the students in all their modules. In fact, I discovered that this feature of Moodle that I had never before investigated is extremely simple to set up, introduce to students and monitor.

Participation in the forums is twofold:

1. Students post their chosen article to the Moodle forum and give a short rationale for their choice, requiring them to consider their audience and look critically at what they read.

2. Students then read the other students' posts, including their rationale, and post their own response to each article.

Forum – Housing in the UK

By midnight on Friday:

- Post an article about housing in the UK
- Include about 50 words saying why you have chosen this article

Before the next class:

- Read your classmates' entries
- Write a brief comment (30-50 words) on each of your classmates' entries

Fig. 2: Screenshot of a Moodle forum task

Clandfield and Hadfield (2017) suggest five principles of online tasks, which this project aimed to follow:

1. Interaction should be human-to-human not human-to-machine. The clearly defined audience for the posts comprises other students in the group and the tutor.

2. The task needs *"a reason for communication"*.
   In this case, sharing information and opinions in preparation for discussion and analysis in class.

3. It must *"have closure in an end-point […] so that it doesn't drag on or fizzle out"*.
   Clear deadlines were set: the initial post by a midweek deadline and comments on others' posts before the next class.

4. The task should *"involve two-way participation: members should both take account of others' contributions and contribute themselves"*.
   Students recommend articles and then give and receive feedback on the articles.

5. Finally, it *"should include a range of interactions and task types"*.
   Here, posting articles, giving a rationale for the recommendation, and commenting on others' posts all occur online and are then transferred to the face-to-face classroom for the group discussion and language work.

Reflections

I am very impressed with the enthusiasm shown by this group of students and their diligence in completing all the forum tasks set. It is impossible to know to what extent the number of students, the design of the task or simply the hard work of these particular students - or a combination of these and other factors - is responsible for the success of this project. However, in this instance students supported one another by sharing knowledge, resources and ideas, which meant they were well equipped for noticeably more in-depth discussions in class. We were also able to spend more time focusing on the discussions and language. In effect, the forum gave students the time and opportunity to rehearse the in-class discussion.

Because this task enabled students to choose their own texts, and because each student in the group read and commented on the others' articles, there was also a more collaborative atmosphere in the classroom when we discussed a certain point in X's article or the language in Y's article.   As Moore & Kot (2018) point out, another feature of mini groups is that *"Your learners will have higher expectations of your feedback so you need to deliver!"* and using the Moodle forum with such a small group has also proved to be a quick and simple way to respond to each student and monitor the group interactions.

For me, this project has been an opportunity to explore more widely something I already used – Moodle. Time is limited, new things take time to learn, and it is often possible to get along without learning something new, so it is easy not to notice the range of tools available. I still believe that technology, like any other resource, must earn its place in teaching and learning. However, this has been a valuable task for maintaining interaction outside the classroom and preparing students for a better experience in the classroom. Because of the size of the group, it has also been very simple to set up and monitor. I now look forward to exploring the opportunities of using the Moodle forum with larger groups and the added complexity I imagine that will entail.

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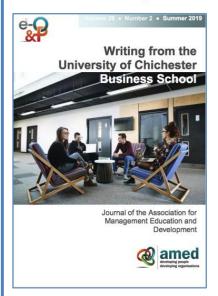Wright, T. (2005) *Classroom Management in Language Education.* New York, USA: Palgrave MacMillan

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