SMALL GROUP LANGUAGE TEACHING AT TERTIARY LEVEL

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Abstract. *One of the benefits of the post-method tertiary education is working in small groups. There are plenty of benefits of teaching in small groups since the main focus is put on the needs of the students, while the main objective is their academic skills growth. Teaching language and literature in small groups at tertiary level creates an interactive and engaging learning environment. It promotes critical thinking, active learning, collaboration and cultural exchange, while providing students with individual attention and support. This approach enhances students' understanding and appreciation of language and literature while fostering the development of various skills that are valuable beyond the academic setting. It also leads to quality enhancement of the teaching process, proven by the students' feedback, and by their higher knowledge shown at mid-term and final exams. This study aims to analyze the process of teaching language and literature in small groups of students majoring English at the Faculty of Education – Bitola, considering their skills, designing achievable learning outcomes, and using various ICT tools to fulfill the individual students' needs. The research uses the qualitative paradigm and descriptive method (primarily reflection). The theory is combined with the reinforcement from the practical teaching experience.*

Key words: *small group, students, EFL, higher education.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The post method era in language teaching refers to a period in the field of language education that occurred as a reaction to the rigid and prescriptive nature of earlier teaching methods. This period began to take shape in the late 20th century and continues to form into the 21st century. It is mainly characterized by a shift away from the one-size-fits-all approach to language teaching and move towards more flexible and learner-centered methods. The most prominent concepts associated with the post-method era include:

eclecticism, focus on learner needs, communicative competence, task-based learning, technology integration, reflective practice, cultural awareness and contextualization.

The post-method era in language teaching challenges the notion that a single method or approach is universally applicable to all learners and recognizes the need for flexibility, learner-centeredness and a focus on real-world communication. Educators today recognize that no single method can meet the diverse needs of learners and they advocate for a combination of approaches, techniques and resources based on the specific context and learner characteristics. This allows teachers to select and adapt methods according to the goals, proficiency levels, learning styles and students' cultural backgrounds.

2. POST – METHOD ERA KEY FEATURES

Eclecticism is perhaps the most prominent feature since it encourages the teachers to draw on a wide range of teaching techniques, methods and materials instead of adhering to a single method. They are encouraged to choose the most appropriate techniques for their specific teaching context and learners.

The needs and interests of learners are also taken in consideration while discussing this post-method period. Teachers are expected to tailor their instruction to meet the individual needs, goals and preferences of their students. The learner-centered approach acknowledges that not all students learn in the same way of have the same linguistic needs.

There is also an emphasis on developing communicative competence which goes beyond mere grammar and vocabulary knowledge. It includes ability of use language appropriately in real-world situations, with a focus on speaking, listening, reading and writing skills. Communicative language teaching is one of the influential approaches that emerge during this era, highlighting the importance of communication in language learning.

Task based language teaching is also a significant feature of the post-method era. It involves students engaging in meaningful, real-world tasks using the foreign language. These tasks could be problem-solving activities, role-plays, or other interactive exercises that encourage practical language use. Language teaching is seen as a dynamic and context-dependent process. Teachers are expected to consider the specific context in which they are teaching, including the socio-cultural and linguistic factors that influence language acquisition.

To be successful in conducting English teaching and learning process, the first step for professors should do is scrutinizing who their students are. Knowing who the students are is essential in English teaching because it is related to what to teach – materials relevant to the students' needs and backgrounds, and how to teach – methods in conveying the materials and ways treating the students. This comes in line with what Mc Neil and Wiles (1990:79) state that a good beginning for professors is to find out some general information about their students. Some authors point that the professors should take into consideration the students' differences with regard to their ability, attainments, levels of motivation etc. Identifying students' characteristics is closely related to learning styles and learning strategies. Knowing students' characteristics will well devise professors to suitably treat their students because each of the students has their own learning styles and distinct intelligences.

Brown (2007:129) states that students learning English language and literature can have visual, auditory or kinesthetic learning styles. According to Brown, visual learners

are good in observing objects, therefore, they prefer to read texts, charts or other graphic information, or even they draw objects. Auditory learners are good in listening. They like listening to lectures, stories and others involving listening. They will enjoy the class and easily understand the materials presented in recordings. Kinesthetic learners like demonstrations and physical activities, body movements. They clearly seem to like activities involving body movements.

Nunan (1999:91) has different classification of students' learning styles. Students in class are classified into concrete learners, analytical learners and auditory-oriented learners. Concrete learners are those who prefer learning by games, pictures, films and video. Analytical are those that like studying grammar, studying alone, finding their own mistakes, having problems to work on. They mainly employ their cognition in learning. Whereas communicative learners are those that like to learn by observing and listening to native speakers, talking to friends in English, using social media in English etc. learning English words by hearing them and learning by conversation. They focus on language use and practice the language they are learning as a means of communication. Whereas authority-oriented learners are those that like their professors explaining everything, writing everything in a notebook, asking questions and learning through discussion.

Beside language learning style, the students have their own language learning strategies which are important in language learning because they are tools for active, self-directed involvement for developing communicative competences. Learning strategies are divided into two groups: direct and indirect. Direct strategies consist of: memory strategies, cognitive strategies and compensation strategies. Indirect strategies involve: metacognitive strategies, affective strategies and social strategies. Therefore, the professors should know, direct and enhance their students' language learning strategies in order that their students can reach the optimal end of their English learning. Comprehending students' characteristics will result in different instruction, or at least different treatment for different students having particular knowledge, skills and behaviors. Differentiating instruction means creating multiple paths so that the students of different abilities, interests or learning needs experience equally appropriate ways to absorbs, use, develop and present concepts as a part of the daily learning process. English professors wishing to humanize the classroom experience treat students as individuals, patiently encourage self-expression, seriously listen to learner response, provide opportunities for learning by doing, and make learning meaningful to students. Therefore, according to Eyring (2001:335) they focus on students' needs and become active co-participants in the teaching-learning process.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGY

Research questions and methodology for investigating small group language teaching are essential for understanding its effectiveness, identifying best practices, and informing instructional improvements. Since small group language teaching at a university level is considered an approach whose purpose is to facilitate language learning and proficiency, naturally the basic research question would refer to its effectiveness and outcomes by discovering how does small group language teaching impact language proficiency and communication skills compared to traditional classroom. The next research question would refer to the interaction and engagement by discovering the types of interactions

and engagement patterns occur in small group language teaching and how do they contribute to learning. And the final research question would have to do with the teacher-student dynamic and the way teacher-student relationships and interactions influence language learning outcomes in small group settings. An inevitable segment of a post-method era research would also be technology integration and how does the integration of technology, such as online platforms, digital resources etc., and impact language learning in small groups.

The aim of this research is to produce arguments in favor of the hypothesis that small group language and literature teaching improves the language proficiency and communication skills and motivates the students to take active part in the process of acquisition of knowledge. The attempt to provide answers to the above-mentioned research questions is based on a case study conducted at the English department of the Faculty of Education at the University "St. Kliment Ohridski" – Bitola.

The method used in this research is based on teachers' observations gained from the conducted individual interviews with the students at the middle and at the end of the semester to explore in-depth insights and experiences related to small group language teaching. By employing these research questions and methodologies we can get valuable insights into the effectiveness, dynamics and potential areas for enhancement of small group language teaching at tertiary level.

3.1. The theory behind small group language teaching

Before moving to the main discussion on the effectiveness of small group language teaching, we will start with defining this particular approach. Small group language teaching at tertiary level is an approach that focuses on facilitating language learning and proficiency through interactive and collaborative sessions involving a small number of students. The theoretical underpinnings of small group language teaching draw from educational theories, language acquisition theories and pedagogical principles that promote effective language learning in a more interactive setting. Here are some key theoretical aspects:

- Communicative language teaching is a widely adopted theoretical framework that emphasizes communication rather than set of isolated grammatical rules. According to Liao and Zhao (2012) it represents set of goals and processes in learning where the main theoretical concept is the acquisition of communicative competence. In small group language teaching CLT encourages interactive activities, discussions, role-plays, and real-life simulations to promote authentic language use and meaningful exchanges among students;
- Constructivist theory posits that learners actively construct knowledge and understanding through interaction with the environment and other learners. Piaget (1977) theorized that learners get more knowledgeable by thinking about new experiences and comparing them to old experiences. Small group language teaching aligns with constructivist principles by providing an environment where students engage with the language in meaningful ways, collaborate with peers and construct their understanding of the language through social interaction and reflective activities;
- Socio-cultural theory, developed by Vygotsky, emphasizes the role of social interaction and cultural context in cognitive development and learning. Small group language teaching leverages this theory by encouraging students to interact and

negotiate meaning within small, culturally diverse group, this promoting language development through shared experiences and social interactions;
- Task-based language teaching focuses on language learning through the completion of communicative tasks, promoting language use in authentic and meaningful contexts. In small group language teaching, according to Skehan (2003) TBLT can be employed to design tasks that encourage collaboration, problem-solving and effective language use, promoting proficiency and communicative competence.

These theoretical frameworks provide a foundation for designing and implementing small group language teaching strategies that optimize language learning experiences and outcomes for students at the tertiary level. The approach emphasizes communication, collaboration, learner autonomy, and meaningful engagement with the language.

Case study: Enhancing understanding and analysis through small group English literature teaching: A Literature Course at the University "St. Kliment Ohridski" – Bitola

Our particular study explores a small group language teaching with students majoring English language and literature at the English department at the University "St. Kliment Ohridski" in Bitola. The aim was to explore the effectiveness of small group instruction in improving comprehension, critical analysis, and engagement with literary works and encouraging collaborative learning among university students. The case study took place during one semester of fifteen weeks, involving 25 undergraduate first-year students, divided into five small groups of five students each. The effectiveness of the groups in improving comprehension, critical analysis, and engagement with literary works and encouraging collaborative learning was qualitatively and quantitatively measured by the immediate groups' instructor prof. Elena K. Ristoska.

The case study process and applied research method included several stages, starting from group formation. Students were grouped based on their academic interests and preferences for literary periods (Old and Middle English, Renaissance, Romanticism, Modernism, Post-modernism). Each group had a mix of students to ensure diverse perspectives. Then, the selection of a teaching method followed and the professor employed a student-centered approach, focusing on collaborative discussions, literary debates, close reading exercises and interactive interpretation of texts within the small groups. Materials and resources that were used consisted of primary and secondary literary texts, critical essays, academic journals and digital platforms were used to expose students to a wide range of literary works and scholarly perspectives. In line with the chosen teaching method focused on the students, the instructional activities that were applied encompassed various exploits including group discussions on assigned readings, analytical presentations, literary debates, character analysis exercises, and comparative analysis of literary works. The results for the research were derived through many assessments, such as formative assessments, individual power point presentations, literary reviews, and critical essays. Additionally, peer evaluations were conducted to assess individual contributions to group discussions and activities.

As expected and noted in the research hypothesis, the results proved enhanced understanding and analysis, since students in the small group work demonstrated improved comprehension and critical analysis skills, enabling them to delve deeper into the intricacies of literary works. This was achieved through collaborative discussions and

close reading activities. As for the participation and engagement, that were also observed during the research, students reported higher engagement levels due to the small group setting, which provided a comfortable space for sharing interpretations, debating literary themes and engaging with diverse perspectives. Peer learning and constructive debate, another segments reviewed and qualitatively measured within this study case research work, were up-skilled, since students actively engaged in peer discussions, enabling them to learn from each other's interpretations and viewpoints. Debates facilitated the exploration of various literary theories and approaches. And last, but not the least, small group students work resulted in effective error correction – immediate feedback and error correction during discussions and presentations helped students refine their analytical skills and literary interpretations.

The case study demonstrated the effectiveness of small group teaching in enhancing understanding, critical analysis and student engagement within an advanced English literature course. The results suggest that this approach fosters a collaborative and dynamic learning environment, encouraging active participation, peer learning and deeper literary exploration at the university level. These findings support the aim of the research to produce arguments in favor of the hypothesis that small group language and literature teaching improves the language proficiency and communication skills and motivates the students to take active part in the process of acquisition of knowledge, since all basic elements of studying English language in efficient manner were improved, i.e. understanding and analysis, participation and engagement, peer learning and constructive debate and error correction.

4. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this research was to produce arguments in favor of the hypothesis that small group language and literature teaching improves the language proficiency and communication skills and motivates the students to take active part in the process of acquisition of knowledge and how important are the interactions and engagement patterns in small group language teaching and how do they contribute to learning. The attempt to verify this was based on a case study conducted with first cycle students at the English Department of the Faculty of Education at the University "St. Kliment Ohridski" in Bitola. It was mainly based on professor' observations, and the regular practice of note-keeping as well as the individual interviews conducted at the middle and the end of the semester.

Based on the findings, the study proved the common belief that the small group teaching is highly effective in teaching language and literature. Small group settings encourage participation and frequent interactions, providing students with ample opportunities to speak, listen and engage in discussions. This heightened engagement leads to improved language fluency and comprehension. Small groups foster effective communication by allowing students to practice the language in a supportive and non-intimating environment. Students gained confidence and fluency by engaging in conversations within their small groups.

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NASTAVA U MALIM GRUPAMA
U VISOKOŠKOLSKOM OBRAZOVANJU

Jedna od prednosti „post-metodskog" visokoškolskog obrazovanja je rad u malim grupama. Mnogo je prednosti nastave u malim grupama jer je glavni fokus stavljen na potrebe studenata, dok je glavni cilj razvoj njihovih akademskih veština. Nastava jezika i književnosti u malim grupama na tercijarnom nivou stvara interaktivno i privlačno okruženje za učenje. Promoviše kritičko mišljenje, aktivno učenje, saradnju i kulturnu razmenu, istovremeno pružajući studentima individualnu pažnju i podršku. Ovaj pristup poboljšava razumevanje i shvatanje jezika i književnosti i istovremeno podstiče razvoj različitih veština koje su vredne izvan akademskog okruženja. To takođe vodi ka unapređenju kvaliteta nastavnog procesa, što se dokazuje povratnim informacijama od studenata, kao i njihovim boljim znanjem na kolokvijumima i završnim ispitima. Ovaj rad ima za cilj da analizira proces nastave jezika i književnosti u malim grupama studenata engleskog jezika na Učiteljskom fakultetu u Bitolju, uzimajući u obzir njihove veštine, osmišljavanje ostvarivih ishoda učenja i korišćenje različitih IKT alata za ispunjavanje individualnih potreba studenata. Istraživanje koristi kvalitativnu paradigmu i deskriptivnu metodu (pre svega refleksiju). Teorija je kombinovana sa potkrepljenjem iz praktičnog nastavnog iskustva.

Ključne reči: *mala grupa, studenti, IKT alati, engleski kao strani jezik, visokoškolsko obrazovanje*