

Enhancing Students' Participation in Classroom Group Discussions: An Action research project on University Students

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Abstract

The objective of this action research project was to investigate and mitigate the challenges that hamper first year university students' participation in group discussions with the intention of enhancing their involvement in group discussions by taking relevant measures against the problems that were identified through different means. Methodologically, twenty six students and six instructors who had courses to the target students took part in this action research. Questionnaire and observation were used to identify the problems affecting students' involvement in group discussions before interventions and after the implementation of the proposed actions. Based on the identified problems, intervention actions were proposed and carefully implemented gradually and rigorous evaluation was made. Then, the evaluation indicated that students had significant improvement as a result of the interventions made. The findings of this project indicated that if instructors/teachers take actions with proper considerations, their instructional practices can be tremendously improved.

Key words: *action research, group discussion, intervention*

Introduction

Countries use various effective education policies to make their learners actively involved in the process of teaching and learning process. Ethiopia is implementing a teaching learning policy on the basis of student centered approach at different school levels. Among others, Assosa University is one of higher education institutions which are conducting teaching learning process within different programs based on active learning philosophy. There are various actors who play major roles in this process such as administrators, instructors and students. In order to insure this, instructors are expected to use different active learning methods including group discussions. However, many students appear to be reluctant and passive to involve actively in group activities. This was evident from the ideas reflected by different instructors who had courses to teach in this institution.

Student's participation is a key element for effective group learning to happen in the classroom. For this reason, students were given various group discussion activities to be completed in cooperative manners. Nonetheless, greater parts of the group work that are provided by the course curricula were mostly dominated either only by some students or majority of the group members were silent. That situation created a question that call to answer for why do majority of the learners don't take part in group discussions.

In the contexts of university teaching, the notion of action research emphasizes the application of instructor's intelligence and specific remedies to alleviate immediate and specific problems which the instructor faces in his/her day to day teaching activities. Accordingly, this action research project was initiated and attempted to search for the causes for passive involvements of first year students in the department of English Language and Literature in group activities. Conversely, this project endeavored to identify and apply actions that can improve and enhance students' participation in group discussions. This action research specifically attempted to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the causes for the target students' less participation in group works?
2. What possible actions can be taken to improve students' involvement in group discussions?

The major objective of this action research project was to improve students' participation in group discussion. Specifically the project attempted:

- ✓ To find out the major causes for less participation of students in group discussions.
- ✓ To explore and apply essential measures which improve students' participation in group discussions.

This action research project would provide important inputs to enhance the teaching learning process. Therefore, students would become active participants and the instructors would improve their use of active learning methods which would ultimately enhance students' engagement in the teaching learning process.

2. Literature Review

There has been a great deal written educational studies about the importance of student participation in the classroom and what teachers do to foster greater participation specifically in group discussions. Accordingly, this brief literature review would focus on the importance of group discussion, facilitating group discussions, assigning roles for students in group discussions, and factors that affect students' participation in group discussions.

2.1. Nature and Importance of Group Discussion

Like other methodologies group discussions have both limitation and strengths. Several problems can be encountered when using group discussions in the classroom such as difficulty to get students participation, being more time consuming, requirement of more forethought than lectures, being not well suited to covering significant amount of contents, and existence of less instructor control.

Despite this nature, discussions approaches are well suited to a variety of course goals including the following. First, discussions provide the instructor with feedback about student learning. Second, discussions are suitable for higher-order cognitive objectives: application, analysis, synthesis, evaluation (Blooms 1978, cited in William and Philip, 1986). Third it is suitable to affective objectives: to develop interest and values, and to

change attitudes. Fourth it makes students become active participants. These things ultimately boost their motivation and make learning more interesting.

2.2. Facilitating Group Discussions

One of the basic components of effective group discussion is related to facilitating the students and the task in various aspects such as preparing for discussion, starting the discussion, encouraging students' participation and guiding the discussion. Here are some strategies that help to prepare for and lead an effective discussion which is adapted from (Kustra & Potter, 2008).

2.2.1. Preparing for a discussion

At preparation stage facilitating group discussions incorporates consideration of the different issues. The first thing is to plan how to conduct the discussion. Next, is to help students prepare for the discussion. In addition to these, clearly communicating how much time you have for questions or discussion and what you are looking for from this time are also important parts of preparation for discussion. Similarly, asking students to state their name before they begin speaking and keeping background noise to a minimum among the aspects of facilitating group discussions before starting the actual group activities. (Ibid)

2.2.2. Formulating ground rules

Ground rules are a set of guidelines describing behaviors that may improve a group's process. Usually the facilitator presents these basic agreements as a proposal at the start of the group's first meeting. Once they are accepted, it is the job of the facilitator to see that the group respects these norms. The next are ground rules by (Beatrice, 2013)

- Everyone participates
- Speak only for yourself
- No interrupting
- Seek a solution
- Begin and end on time
- Have an agenda and stick to it
- One speaker at a time
- Listen with respect
- No personal attacks or blaming
- Confidentially (when appropriate)
- Alternate men and women speakers

2.2.3. Starting a discussion

Facilitating group discussion, while starting group discussions, also requires instructors to accomplish different tasks. The issues considered at this stage include:

- ✓ Refer to questions or issues you distributed.
- ✓ Make a list of key points.
- ✓ Use a partner activity.
- ✓ Pose an opening question and give students a few minutes to record an answer.
- ✓ Divide students into small groups to discuss a specific question or issue.

- ✓ Pose a controversial issue and organize an informal debate. (Kustra & Potter, 2008).

2.2.4. Encouraging student participation

To encourage student participation, creation of an inclusive discussion environment is vital. Group members will be more likely to contribute to a discussion if they feel they are in a safe, comfortable environment. The strategies for achieving this are use of an icebreaker activity and to ask students to introduce themselves and interests and backgrounds, to learn all of your students' names, and to arrange the seating in the room, if possible, into a semicircle so that the group members can see each other.

The other issues that encourage student participation are allowing students to ask questions or share ideas in class, giving students low-stakes opportunities to think and discuss content – this is a "tolerance for error" approach, facilitating smaller discussions among students before you ask students to share with the entire class and facilitate smaller activities before discussion and questions start, so that students have time and space to compose their ideas. (ibid)

Moreover, scholars advise to have students take turns writing down questions and answers on whiteboards or on large flipchart paper and then to post the notes around the classroom for future reference. Besides, positively reinforcing student contributions, limiting your own involvement and maintaining appropriate silence in the classroom are also important aspects. Additionally, having a balanced student's voice during the discussion is also vital for maintaining active student interest and involvement.

2.2.5. Guiding the discussion

The other aspect of facilitating group discussions is concerned with what to do when guiding the discussion. Tasks of the facilitator at this stage include: keeping the discussion focused, repeating the key point of all comments or questions for the rest of the class, taking notes, and being alert for signs that the discussion is deteriorating. Besides, preventing the discussion from deteriorating into a heated argument, bringing closure to the discussion and recalling that not all students are comfortable with extended direct eye contact are also issues that should be addressed when guiding the discussion. (Kustra & Potter, 2008)

2.2.6. Evaluating the discussion

The last task of facilitating group discussions deals with assessment of how effective the discussion was and how much did students understood the objectives of the discussion. Some of the tasks include asking students to write a one-minute paper, asking students to respond to specific questions about the discussion, and conducting your own informal evaluation of the discussion. (ibid)

In general, the aforementioned tasks are done before, during and after discussions to facilitate group discussions. Therefore, facilitators should consider which activities are effective, which students are in good progress and which ones are behind, and take the necessary measures by reading the given discussion context. The overall effects of these tasks will ultimately aid facilitation of group discussions.

2.3. Roles Students to Play in Group Discussions

Roles in groups are traditionally divided into task and maintenance roles. Task roles help the group make progress and move towards achieving goals; and maintenance roles help the group build or sustain a sense of community and cohesion (www.turning-the-tide.org). Everyone in the group plays one role or more either consciously, though more often unconsciously. The challenge for facilitators is to recognize and manage all the roles and fill the

appropriate one when necessary. The next tables illustrate the roles, purposes and techniques in both task and maintenance roles which are adopted from www.turning-the-tide.org.

Table 1. Task Roles - help the group makes progress and move towards achieving goals

Roles	Purpose	Technique
<i>Initiator</i>	Gives direction and purpose to the group	Proposing, goals; defining problems; suggesting procedures
<i>Information seeker</i>	Makes group aware of need for information	Requesting relevant facts; asking for clarification
<i>Information-giver</i>	Provides group information relevant to its work	Offering relevant facts, avoiding reliance on opinions when information is needed
<i>Opinion-giver</i>	Provides basis for group decision	Stating feelings, beliefs and evaluating a suggestion
<i>Clarifier</i>	Eliminates confusion about the current task	Defining, interpreting; identifying issues & alternatives
<i>Elaborators</i>	Reduces ambiguity, synthesizes information	Giving examples, developing plans and explaining
<i>Harmonizer</i>	Adjusts or harmonizes issues, ideas, proposals that may conflict	Suggesting ways that different issues can be handled, new ways forward
<i>Process-organizers</i>	Establishes an order to the meeting	Suggesting agenda items, procedures, where to go next
<i>summarizer</i>	Shows how ideas are related; draws ideas together	Pulling together related issues, showing contradictions, restating suggestions
<i>Philosopher/critic</i>	Shows that a certain issue is not unique; inserts views from similar experiences	Drawing general reports from specific ones; critically examining assumptions & ideas (not people!)

Table 2. Task Maintenance Roles - help the group builds or sustain a sense of community and cohesion

Role	Purpose	Techniques
Encourager	Brings out others' opinions & gives others credit	Being friendly, responsive & accepting others' inputs
Feelings-expresser	Calls group attention to reactions to ideas and suggestions made	Expressing own feelings and restating others' feelings
Tension-reliever	Reduces tension; allows group to express its feelings	Joking, clowning; suggesting breaks or exercises/games
Mediator/ Harmonizer	Maintains group cohesion; reconciles disagreements	Offering or accepting compromises; admitting error; supporting reconciliation of differences
Facilitator	Maintains open discussion;	Drawing out silent members; suggesting procedures

	keeps idea flowing	
Standards-setter	Makes group aware of direction and progress	Expressing the group concern; suggesting tasks; stating standards and goals for the group to achieve
Interpreter	Explains what someone has said; helps others to understand each other	Paraphrasing or summarizing speakers' contributions
Follower	Provides stimulating & interested participants	Accepting ideas of others; going along with the group
Agreement-Tester	Finds out how close the group is to agreement	Noting progress; stating areas, making proposals for group reaction; asking if agreement is likely
Evaluator	Keeps group in line with goals	Measuring accomplishments against goals
Time-keeper	Keeps the group on track in terms of agreed schedule	Noting the time and suggesting what next

Among the vital skills for a facilitator is to learn and constantly sharpen the ability to identify and fill functions as needed, or point them out to the group. It is also healthy to rotate particular roles so that the students can have a broader understanding of how all the parts fit together to make a whole. Generally, dividing up these roles can add a great element of cohesion to the group.

2.4. Factors that Affect Students' Participation in Group Discussions

Various factors may affect students' participation in group discussions which may be related to different causes. Various potential problems may be stated in relation to students. To mention few, the participant who talks too much, the member who will not talk and the discussion that turns into an argument are some of them. In addition, unclear or hesitant comments, the discussion that goes off track, the student who attacks the facilitator and other students are also the other factors that affect group discussion. www.cirtl.net/diversity/resources/

In good discussions, conflicts, ambiguities, arguments and so on will sometimes arise. If such conflicts are left ambiguous, they may cause continuing trouble. Therefore, the facilitator could minimize effects of these problems using various ways to handle these situations including confrontation, active listening, locating, reframing and deferring.

Generally, maintaining discussions often means dealing as smoothly as possible with the problems that arise. Hence, the facilitator can take a strong position as moderator, preventing participants from interrupting each other or speaking simultaneously. These could be tackled by setting ground rules for discussion, such as asking participants to focus conflict on ideas rather than people and to resist being judgmental.

3. Methodology of the Study

This action research was conducted on students of first year English Language and Literature Assosa University. The rationale behind selecting the department was the researcher's perceived and practical problems in his teaching experiences at the university and in the above stated program.

3.1. Sample Population and Sampling Techniques

The subjects of the study were fifty two students from first year Agribusiness and Value-Chain Management Program and six instructors who gave different courses those students. Twenty six students were selected as a

sample using random sampling technique, and six instructors were selected using purposive sampling technique.

3.2. Data Collection Instruments

Due to its convenience to collect data needed for the project, observation and questionnaires were employed as primary data collection instrument to collect data in this action research project. Accordingly, both open-ended and close-ended questionnaires items were prepared and administered on students and instructors to get insights into what factors affect students' participation in group discussions. Besides, observation checklist was prepared and used to observe and analyze the students and teachers activities during group discussions in the actual classroom sessions.

3.3. Techniques of Data Analysis

Both qualitative and quantitative methods were employed to analyze the data collected through open-ended and close-ended questionnaire. The data emerged from the questionnaire was organized and tabulated. Then, meaning resulting from the analyses was interpreted using percentages. Finally, similar patterns and themes were categorized from both questionnaires and the core findings drawn from the two questionnaire items were narrated qualitatively.

3.4. Initial Findings

Various questions with the target of identifying factors affecting students' participation in group discussions were provided to both students and instructors using open-ended and close-ended questionnaires. Accordingly, the findings emerging from both questionnaires are discussed in the succeeding parts.

Table 3. Results from close-Ended student Questionnaire

No	Items	<i>Responses, frequencies and percentages</i>											
		Response	Frequency	%	Response	Frequency	%	Response	Frequency	%	Response	Frequency	%
1	Do your instructors give you group activities?	Yes	24	92	No	2	8	-	-	-	-	-	-
2	How often do your teachers give you group discussions?	often	5	19	sometimes	17	65	Rarely	4	15	Never	0	0
3	What do your teachers often do when they give you group works for discussion? (more than one option is applicable)	Giving instructions	6	23	Checking & evaluating answers	9	35	Receiving answer	7	27	Clarifying & giving support	4	15
4	How often do your teachers encourage you to involve in group works/discussions?	often	3	12	sometimes	10	38	Rarely	13	50	Never	0	0
5	Do your teachers assign roles to you (e.g. chairperson, secretary, time keeper...) while you discuss in groups?	Yes	5	19	No	21	81	-	-	-	-	-	-
6	How often do your teachers assign roles to you group discussions?	Often	0	0	sometimes	0	0	rarely	5	19	Never	21	81
7	How often do your teachers give you enough time during group discussions?	Often	4	15	sometimes	12	46	rarely	10	38	Never	0	0
8	What do you think about learning & sharing knowledge in group discussions?	very important	6	23	Important	9	35	Less important	8	31	Unimportant	3	12
9	How do you feel about participating in group works/discussions?	very important	5	19	Important	4	15	Less important	11	42	Unimportant	6	23

10	What do you often do when you are given group works in the classroom?	participating actively	3	12	Listening to others	15	58	Doing other things	4	15	I don't do anything	4	15
11	How many students do often involve when you discuss in groups?	all	0	0	Many	4	15	some	16	62	very few	6	23
12	How often do you actively participate in group discussions/works in the classroom?	often	5	19	Sometimes	9	35	Rarely	10	38	never	2	8

Table 4. Results from close-Ended Instructor Questionnaire

No	Items	<i>Responses, frequencies and percentages</i>											
		Response	Frequency	%	Response	Frequency	%	Response	Frequency	%	Response	Frequency	%
1	Do you give you group activities in the classroom?	Yes	6	100	no	0	0	-	-	-	-	-	-
2	How often do you give group discussions?	often	2	33	sometimes	3	50	rarely	1	17	never	0	0
3	How do you rate students' involvement in group discussions?	Very active	0	0	active	0	0	to some extent active	2	33	passive	4	67
4	How many students do often involve when they discuss in groups?	all	0	0	many	0	0	some	5	83	very few	1	17
5	How often do you assign roles to students (e.g. chairperson, secretary...) when they discuss in groups?	Often	0	0	sometimes	1	17	rarely	3	50	never	2	33

6	What do you often do with students when you give them group discussions?	let them discuss & find out without any interference	3	50	check & clarify the issue with every group	1	17	i hear what they say and give feedback	2	33	others (please specify)	0	0
7	How often do you give encouragement and ample time during group discussions?	Often	2	33	sometimes	3	50	rarely	1	17	never	0	0
8	What do majority of students often do when you give group works in the classroom?	participating actively	0	0	listening to others	5	83	other activities	1	17	nothing	0	0

NB: '- - -' Means not concerned

Table 5. Results from Observation before intervention

no	Items	observation frequency											
1.	Does the instructor give group activities?	yes	✓	No									
2.	How often instructor give group discussions?	often		sometime		rarely	✓						
3.	Number of students often involved when they discuss in groups.	all		many		some		few				✓	
4.	Activities students often do when they are given group works.	participating		listening to others	✓	doing other things		nothing					
5.	The extent of students' involvement in group discussions.	very active		active		to some extent active		passive				✓	
6.	Frequency of teachers' encouragement to make students involve in group discussions.	always		Often		sometimes	✓	rarely					
7.	Tasks teachers often do with students when they give group discussion.	Giving instructions only	✓	asking for & receiving answers		clarifying/giving support							
8	The extent of teachers' assignment of roles to students (e.g. Chairperson, secretary ...) in group discussions?	often		sometimes		rarely		never				✓	

3.4.1. Findings from the Close-Ended Questionnaire and observation

Different questions which aimed at finding out the factors that affect students' involvement in group discussions were provided to both students and instructors in open-ended questionnaires. Accordingly, the findings emerging from the close-ended questionnaires are discussed in the subsequent paragraphs. The first question asked in the close-ended questionnaire was about whether instructors give group discussions to the students. Accordingly, the data from both students and instructors confirmed that instructors provide students with various group activities. However, the frequency in which students are provided with such discussion activities is less. This is to mean that 33% of the sample data shows as the students were passive in group discussion. Besides, 83% of the respondents responded that majority of the students do not take part in group discussions.

Students were also asked to reflect on their feeling about participating in group discussions; and the data obtained from them generally indicated that majority of the students perceive group discussion as vital methodology to learn better. But, when students and instructors respond how often students actually participate in discussions, it was found that their participation is very less. Moreover, many students deal with other personal duties which are unrelated to the given discussion tasks. On the other hand, when exposing about what instructors do with students in group discussions, the data revealed that 33% of the respondents responded as the students do not get enough time, support, and encouragement. Besides, the data revealed that majority of the instructors deal with giving instructions, asking and receiving answers than facilitating and clarifying the activities. The other issue inquired was related to if instructors assign different roles to play when they discuss in groups. The data showed 50% of respondents responded as the majority of the instructors do not assign roles like chairperson, secretary, timekeeper etc. to students.

3.4.2. Findings from Open-Ended Questionnaire

Both students and instructors were asked to point out what factors affecting students' active participation in group discussions. Accordingly, fear of being mistaken before friends, domination of some students, lack of clarity with discussion issues, lack of encouragement, self-confidence, and experiences on students and sense of dependency were listed as factors. In the meantime concerning what should be done to improve participation in group discussions, both instructors and students have suggested issues related to teachers and students. From teachers' perspectives they suggested giving equal opportunity for all students, encouragement, enhancing students' self confidence in speaking and etc. On the other hand, being active participants, being disciplined, being ready to learn from others, discussing only given topics not unrelated issues, and so on are issues for raised for improvement from students' perspectives.

Generally, it was found that different challenges that are related to both instructors and students were affecting students' involvement in group discussions. Some of the factors related to students include: fear, reluctance, domination of few students, less attention, and dealing with other personal tasks. Meanwhile, lack of encouragement and support, shortage of time, focus on giving instruction and questions, not giving roles to students were some of the factors found affecting students participation. Therefore, based on recommendations from instructors, students, and the literature in the field, the following interventions were proposed and implemented while students were in the actual classroom duty so as to improve students' participation in group discussions.

4. Proposed Actions for Interventions

The objective of this action research was to improve students' participation in group discussions. For the purpose of improving students' participation in group discussions, the following intervention actions were proposed and implemented while students were conducting the actual teaching and learning practice.

4.1. Proposed actions for the problem

According to the collected data, there were various causes that affect students' participation in group discussion. Based on the objectives of this action research project, some actions were proposed that the researchers wanted to act on the problems. Among other things the followings were the major ones:

1. Properly planning the activities of the group discussions ahead
2. Creating expectation of participation and clarifying how participation influence grades
3. Assigning roles that change on other discussion
4. Discussing with instructors on roles and application of group works in the class
5. Avoiding fear and increasing students' attention and motivation with successive advice
6. Redirecting questions to other students
7. Controlling and giving attention to students activities
8. Managing the students those who have the character of dominator in group discussion
9. Giving feedback and rewarding student contributions
10. Managing problematic behavior in group discussion

4.2. Implementations of proposed actions

In order to improve the students' participation in group discussion various actions had been implemented with some instructors those who are giving the course in this semester for the targeted students, that is, Agribusiness and Value chain Managements of first year students. According to some instructors in this department, the major causes for less participation of the students were lack of group discussion experience in lower grades and lack of self-confidence. So, to overcome this problem group discussion method were mostly used by some instructors.

Firstly, the awareness' of the students were raised by discussion of instructors with the students on the significance of active involvements of students in group discussion. This is to mean that the teacher encouraged the students those who are previously passive during group discussion. This is mainly done by managing the students those who have the characters of dominator. Not only this, the strategy of rewarding the students for their contributions and giving feedback is another intervention action taken to enhance students' participation in group discussion.

Generally, all proposed actions listed above had been implemented to improve the student's participation in group discussion. These implementations of action were mostly done with the collaboration of teachers who had courses in the target students and who were members of the action learning set that conducted this action research project.

5. Findings after implementation of proposed actions

Data has also been gathered after various intervention measures had been taken place. This is mainly done through observation when the students' are participating in group discussion within different sessions. For instance, the extent of students participation was passive before the intervention, where as their involvement was improved and many students became active participants in group discussion. Therefore, the following data

from the observation depicted that there were some improvements of students in group discussion after the implementation of proposed actions.

Table 6. Results from Observation after intervention

No	Items	Observation frequency					
		all	many	✓	some	few	
1.	Number of students often involved when they discuss in groups.			✓			
2.	Activities students often do when they are given group works.	participating	Listening to others	✓	Doing other things	✓	nothing
3	The extent of students' involvement in group discussions.	very active	active	✓	to some extent active		passive
4.	Frequency of teachers' encouragement to make students involve in group discussions.	always	often	✓	sometimes		rarely
5.	Tasks teachers often do with students when they give group discussion.	giving instructions	Asking for & receiving answers		clarifying & giving support	✓	
6	The extent of teachers' assignment of roles to students (e.g. chairperson, secretary ...) in group discussions?	often	✓	sometimes	rarely		never

6. Evaluation of the action/intervention

As a result of the implemented actions, students were observed participating relatively more enthusiastically in the different group discussion activities than the previous ones. Accordingly, more activities that were suitable for group learning and that promote cooperative learning were given to students. The students were learning and sharing their knowledge and feelings freely in which they developed their speaking and self-expression skills. This was mainly evident in the data gathered after the intervention had been made and indicated in the following tables. Since the purpose of the research was to bring improvement on the students' participation in group discussions, the desired changes were gradual and many changes were observed with the actions taken in one cycle. In general, the process ultimately made the teaching learning process lively and both the students and instructors became beneficiaries of the actions taken.

Table 7. Comparative analysis of observation results before and after intervention

No	Issues observed	Before intervention	After intervention
1	Involvements of students in group discussion.	Some	Many
2	The extent of students participation	Passive	fairly active
3	Activities made by student during group discussion	Listening to others and doing other things	Mainly participating on the given topics
4	The extent to which the instructors assign roles for student	Rarely	Sometimes
5	Encouragements and support given for the students.	Rarely	Always

6	Tasks teachers often do with students when they give group discussion.	giving instructions	clarifying & giving support
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7. Conclusion

The major objective of this action research project was to improve students' participation in group discussions by identifying factors affecting their involvement and by proposing and implementing appropriate intervention. For this reason, different factors related to students and instructors were identified through questionnaires distributed to both instructors and students. Accordingly, different intervention actions that were supposed to bring about change on the identified problems were taken, and gradual improvement was observed in students' participation as a result of the taken actions. Generally, it is possible to conclude that the proposed actions were appropriate interventions to the identified problems and had brought the desired changes on students' participation in group discussions. Therefore, instructors have to always aspire for remedies to challenges they face from different obstacles hampering students involvement in group tasks.

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