



Avoid using the first language in Group-based communicative English classroom of higher education (Small scale experimental study in Georgia)

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Abstract

Avoid using first language in group-based communicative English classroom, especially in higher education level, is full of challenges for students as well as for teachers, who should plan lesson based on effective studying methods and ways. Teacher's role as the facilitator or/and group process manager in this type of activity is not always enough to promote students' usage of second language. Reviewing various literature on this topic, the researcher, who is also the lecturer at one of the universities in Georgia, began to find solution how to deal with this challenge. The paper presents a small-scale experimental study aimed at finding the most effective way to reduce first language usage in group-based communicative English classrooms. The researcher assigned to one of the student the role of facilitator and process manager observing the impact on the group. The study discusses the results of the experiment, including students' feedback, analysis of the effects on students' behavior, and the extent of first language use during communicative activity. Additionally, the paper reports findings from a small-scale questionnaire involving teachers facing similar challenges, offering recommendations and suggestions. In the summary, this experiment represents an initial step in addressing the challenge - using less first language in group-based communicative English classroom, highlighting the need for further research, offering to try finding other ways to deal with this issue and careful study in the future.

Keywords: first language, communicative English classroom, group-based activities, higher education, Georgia

1. Introduction

Avoid using students' first language (L1) during group-based communicative classroom is a challenging task for both teachers and students. This is particularly true when the teacher's primary goal is to enhance students' speaking skills and maximize their knowledge. Students

often tend to use L1 during group discussions or when developing ideas and concepts in group activities. There are cases when students struggle to express themselves fluently in the second language (L2) or feel more comfortable using L1. Additionally, they may forget certain phrases or words in L2, and looking for them in online dictionaries takes more time, leading them to revert to L1. Furthermore, within a group, there may be students with limited proficiency in L2 who might be too shy or lack the confidence to speak fluently in L2. When speaking in L2, students also must focus on the accuracy of their speech, whereas in L1, they can speak more freely without such concerns. Despite these challenges, the use of L1 has its benefits and is often unavoidable or even necessary to use. The researcher will explore this topic further in the article.

Teachers frequently struggle to find effective ways to reduce the use of L1 and increase the focus on L2. When teachers take the roles of facilitator or/and group process manager, they strive to encourage and motivate students to use more L2 during activities, often leading by giving them their own example.

So sum up, as Atkinson (1993:2) states: "It is impossible to talk of a 'right balance' or a perfect model for using L1--it's not that simple. L1 can be a valuable resource if it is used at appropriate times and in appropriate ways".

In this paper, the researcher, who is also a teacher, conducted an experiment in which one of the students was assigned the two main roles typically held by the teacher - a facilitator and group process manager. Then the researcher observed and analyzed whether this approach helped in reducing the use of L1 during group-based communicative classroom. Additionally, the researcher conducted a questionnaire with other teachers who face the same challenge in their lessons and, in the end, provided some recommendations for teachers.

2. Literature review

Using L1 in teaching L2 is not surprisingly and sometimes unavoidable, though on the other hand it might have disruption adopting L2 more effectively and productively. There had been implemented several studies why both teachers and students use L1 during the classes and here are some of the reasons:

- "Establishing constructive social relationships;
- Communicating complex meanings to ensure understanding and/or save time;
- Maintaining control over the classroom environment."

Littlewood & Yu (2009).

Moreover, Cole (1998) states that teacher can leverage their students' prior knowledge of their first language (L1) to enhance their comprehension of a second language (L2). For instance, if students are familiar with the concept of a noun, it is easier to translate the term "noun" rather than to explain it in the second language. Conversely, a teacher who lacks insight into their students' previous learning experiences may inadvertently focus on teaching concepts that the students already understand.

However, it is considered that using L1 is most useful at the beginning and low levels when students struggle to use L2 and might have some challenges, like understanding of grammatical structures or expressing their ideas with some phrases or words; in this case, using L1 will save time and also the energy of the teacher (Weschler cited in Cole, 1998).

It is stated that group-work is a type of work where using L1 is more common than other kind of work as it encourages interaction among students though controlling which language students might use is another issue to consider. Graham (2018) explains that teachers are often under pressure to adopt a monolingual approach, which suggests that the first language (L1) is not valuable in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) or English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms. This approach argues that using L1 could deprive students of essential exposure to the second language (L2) and impede their progress (Bhooth, Azman & Ismail, 2014:76). However, experiences from bilingual education indicate that allowing students to use their L1 can enhance their L2 performance (Cummins, 1981).

In this regard, using L1 at the optimal level comes into play, which is defined by Turnbull and Dailey-O'Cain (2009:183): "Optimal first language use in communicative and immersion second and foreign language classrooms recognizes the benefits of the learner's first language as a cognitive and metacognitive tool, as a strategic organizer, and as a scaffold for language development".

In brief,, avoiding usage of L1 during teaching L2, we should consider benefits of L1 and do not cross all its advantages as suggests Lo (2015:14) "By this study, we are hoped to raise awareness with respect to re-thinking of the effect of L1 use in the instruction and learning of L2 education environments".

Regarding the teacher's role in group work activities, it is asserted that the primary responsibilities of teachers are to act as facilitators of the communication process and as independent participants within the learning group (Breen and Candlin, 1980). Brown (2001) further elaborates by identifying four main roles for teachers: **facilitators** of the communication process, **need analysts**, **counselors**, and **group process managers** (Le, 2019):

- Firstly, as facilitators, teachers assist learners in planning and executing their own learning activities, such as: setting objectives, selecting materials, and evaluating their progress, thereby helping them develop the skills and knowledge necessary for these tasks. To fulfill this role, teachers must adopt three sub-roles: language model, co-communicator, and controller (Harmer, 2007).
- Secondly, as need analysts, teachers identify and address students' language needs by analyzing their learning styles, assets, and goals to prepare effective lessons.
- Thirdly, as counselors, teachers demonstrate effective communication techniques to ensure alignment between speaker intentions and listener interpretations, using paraphrasing, confirmation, and feedback.
- Lastly, as group process managers, teachers monitor and encourage students, while resisting the urge to fill gaps in vocabulary, grammar, and strategy (Finocchiaro and Brumfit, 1983; Littlewood, 2011). They should take note of these gaps to provide comments or practice later. At the end of activities, teachers suggest alternatives and extensions, and assist the group in self-correcting their discussions.

To sum up, planing and implementing group-work activities is challenging; therefore, it requires special preparation beforehand and later, during the process, teacher's skills and effort to make group-work interesting and engaging all the members in the process as well as achieve the task of the group-work which results in improving L2 skills and knowledge.

3. Objectives of the research

The researcher would like to discuss a case study conducted at Akaki Tsereteli State University in Kutaisi, Georgia, where the researcher is employed. Akaki Tsereteli State University, founded in 1933, has a history spanning nearly a hundred years. It is a prominent higher education institution in Georgia, renowned for its excellent traditions and significant contributions to the cultural, intellectual, and moral development of generations.

The case study was conducted with the 3rd year students of the various specialties who choose to study English language and literature as their additional speciality (as a minor program). The researcher, at the same time the teacher, taught them the subject - "English for Tourism". The syllabus involves teaching students with special vocabulary for Tourism sphere and aims to prepare them to have excellent communicative skills in English needed for their professional development and career. Three hours are allocated for the subject in a week with the mixture of conducting lectures and practicing language.

During group-work communicative classroom, the teacher observed that students primarily used their first language (L1) rather than the second language (L2). However, when the teacher approached their groups, made suggestions, or offered assistance, students began to speak in L2. However, the students delivered impressive presentations in L2, partially achieving the task's objective. Nevertheless, presenting the outcomes of the task required less time compared to the process, which was mainly flowed by using intensively L1. As the result, the researcher began to search for solutions that might deal with this challenge.

The aims of the case study were:

- ✓ To do an experiment how to promote using less L1 in group-based communicative activities;
- ✓ To identify the challenges why students prefer to use L1 instead of L2;
- ✓ To analyze the benefits and drawbacks of the provided solution by the researcher;
- ✓ To discuss and summarize how to deal with the challenge of using L1 during group-work communicative classroom with other teachers based on the answers of the questionnaire.

Though, aims of the case study were achieved and the researcher gained useful information from the respondents, the researcher also did the questionnaire for further study, made conclusions and some recommendations based on it. There were **the following limitations** of this study:

- Number of students involved in this experiment was not enough to generalize the conclusion of the study;
- There was done only oral discussion with the students, not anonymous questionnaires to the participants of the experiment that might give more clear understanding of the drawbacks of this study;
- There was not done face-to-face discussion with the teachers about this challenge that might be useful for the study.

4. Materials and Methods

The case study was divided into two parts. Initially, the researcher conducted an experiment, taking detailed notes throughout the process. At the end of the experiment, the researcher

analyzed the results, first with the students and then independently. After this analysis, the researcher recognized the need to send a questionnaire to other teachers to learn about their experiences and solution for addressing this challenge.

The researcher used so called "Pre-experimental design" for the study. The pre-experimental research design is the simplest form of experimental research design in statistics. In this method, after establishing certain elements as causes and effects, one or more groups are monitored. This approach is often used to assess the need for further research within the target population, making it an efficient procedure. In a pre -experimental design, one or more dependent groups are analyzed to observe the impact of an independent variable believed to induce change. It is the most fundamental type of experimental study design and does not include a control group (Hanrahan, Zhu, Gibani, Patil et al., 2005 cited in Zubair, 2023).

Here are the notes taken by the teacher during the experiment, separately for each class that give full and detail description of the experiment that will be analyzed later. In the notes taken by the teacher, the student who is given the role of the facilitator and process manager is given abbreviation - F&PM (F- referred to the role of "facilitator" and PM - referred to the role of "process manager").

4.1. Class 1

There were three groups in this class (See Appendix N1). The group members were chosen randomly (they had already been divided into classes according to their level of English knowledge at the beginning of the course as it is established by the syllabus).

At the beginning of the lesson, the teacher explained the students that they would do group-work activity but that time it would be an experiment and explained its aims and the process of the work. F&PM was chosen according to students' will though F&PM was shy nearly whole group activity's process. At first phase, he could hardly understand how to be involved in the group work, could not guess his role and seemed to be inactive. Later, after teacher's explanation, he became more active, tried to give some advice to each group, expressed his own ideas.

1st group began actively involving F&PM in the working process, they seemed to be more open to him and to his ideas. Though, sometimes his ideas were not acceptable by group members that made him upset and disappointed. 2nd group asked him to help with English words and phrases. Moreover, he had a look of the 3rd group paper and mentioned that they did so well that their was no need of his involvement. This might be understood in many ways: a) F&PM skimmed their notes and found that they wrote every point of the task; b) he might be shy to show off his knowledge and tried to stay friendly to them; c) he was just tired of this process and tried to get rid of workload or d) as he knew his course-mates very well, he thought his ideas won't be taken into account by this group members. Itself, this group seemed to be more confident though, later after teacher's advise on actively involving F&PM in the process, they gave him their paper just to have a look.

As for using L1 during activity, all three groups used more L1 than L2. Group 2 paid attention if F&PM was listening to them and only when he came close to their desk, they began to speak in L2. As for the 3rd group, they used L1 and L2 50/50, even after approaching F&PM they continued the same way. On the contrary, 1nd group spoke only in L2 when F&PM came close to them.

Teacher asked F&PM to remind the group about the time and summarize it. 2nd and 3rd groups asked for extending the time, though the 1st one stated that they were ready. As for the

comments and ideas of F&PM, as he stated later, some of his ideas were taken into account but only by one group.

4.2. Class 2

There were two groups in this class (See Appendix N2). The group members were chosen randomly as in Class 1. At the beginning of the lesson, the teacher explained the students that they would do group-work activity but that time it would be an experiment and explained its aims and the process of the work. In this class, nobody showed willingness to take the role of F&PM. This might be due to the a) lack of understanding of the role of the F&PM though teacher tried to explain it clearly, or b) students had no will to take this challenging role. Finally, teacher chose less active student from the class to be F&PM as she was often passive member of the group and she considered that she might become more active and that might raise her motivation and involvement.

As the teacher had expected, at the beginning, F&PM was shy, then she was encouraged by the teacher and began to implement given roles - she went between groups, made notes and became very active. In short, this role appeared to be more comfortable for her as she was an introvert person; moreover, she felt more comfortable working individually as well as being facilitator not the group-work member.

Though, during the activity there were some challenges for F&PM. 1st group did not involve her in the process; group members preferred to work alone and that made F&PM feel less comfortable to work with them; even being facilitator and process manager, they did not acknowledge her role. F&PM could begin to implement her role only after teacher's remark but still, based on their previous behavior, F&PM expressed less willingness to perform her role. F&PM did not feel comfortable with group 1 and went to the second group, where she felt more respected as her ideas were taken into account and she was more welcomed.

As for the 2nd group, they behaved on the contrary of the first group. They were open to her involvement in the group work as the facilitator, asked her ideas, made notes, tried to take into consideration her suggestions and so on.

As for using L1 during activity, 2nd group used more L1 than L2. They did not pay attention if F&PM was listening to them or not; in addition, they worked naturally and behaved as they did in the same kind of activities. On the contrary of 2nd group, 1st group tried to speak L2 in most cases. That might be a) what they generally used to do in group-work or b) when they heard about the aims of this experiments they tried their best.

Teacher asked F&PM to remind the group about the time and summarize it, consider all points. 2nd group gave F&PM the paper to have a look and asked what she thought; some members of the group did not have willingness to consider her ideas. 1st group was so much involved in the process by themselves that they did not pay attention to F&PM though she herself tried to be involved in the process. 2nd group began to speak more in L2 after teacher's comment. When the teacher reminded that 1 minute was left, F&PM moved back to 1st group, though mostly she was with the second group. During the conclusion of the task and presenting it to the teacher, F&PM tried to express her own ideas about the group work and the process.

5. Results of the experiment

To summarize the analysis of students' behavior during the experiment and the subsequent discussion with them, several advantages were observed when the F&PM (Facilitator and Process Manager) took on the role of facilitator and group process manager:

- **Increased Openness:** Some students felt more open with their F&PM compared to the teacher. They actively engaged the F&PM in the discussion process and didn't feel tense when the F&PM approached or listened to their conversations. Unlike when the teacher took these two roles, the presence of the F&PM did not interrupt or disturb the group work process.
- **Enhanced Comfort:** Students appeared more comfortable when their F&PM acted as the facilitator and process manager. Once they understood the role and significance of their F&PM, they seemed more relaxed, as the F&PM shared the same language proficiency, age, and generational perspectives. This peer connection helped the F&PM better understand the dynamics of group work and the nature of such activities.
- **Ease in Communication:** Some students felt more comfortable asking their course-mate, the F&PM, to make adjustments to the group work process, such as altering the task duration. Effective time management is crucial, especially in a lesson controlled by the teacher, and students found it easier to negotiate these changes with a peer.

There were identified some challenges during the group-work:

- ❖ **Preference for Teacher Facilitation:** Some students preferred having the teacher as the facilitator rather than their F&PM. They wondered why their F&PM had to take on a passive role, merely observing and controlling the group's actions, with some even expressing resistance to this arrangement.
- ❖ **Lack of Trust in F&PM's Suggestions:** Some students did not trust or value the F&PM's suggestions or comments on the task. They believed the F&PM had no right to make suggestions since they were not an active participant in the group work and did not contribute to the task.
- ❖ **Discomfort with F&PM's Involvement:** Some students did not feel comfortable with the F&PM's involvement, which the researcher speculated might be due to a lack of understanding of the F&PM's role.
- ❖ **Reluctance Due to L1 Monitoring:** Some students were unwilling to have the F&PM involved, particularly when it came to monitoring the use of L1 during activities. They felt more comfortable using L1 for various reasons, such as needing specific terms they couldn't recall in L2 or feeling more natural expressing ideas in L1. Knowing that the F&PM was monitoring their use of L1 made them uncomfortable.
- ❖ **Limited English Use:** Some students only spoke English when the F&PM was nearby.

After the experiment, the researcher discussed the benefits and effectiveness of the experiment with the students involved in it. Later, the researcher herself made analyzes on the drawbacks of the experiment and here is the summary:

- 1) Limited time to prepare students for such changes;
- 2) Giving more clear explanation to students of the benefits of this experiment;
- 3) More work on the raising the willingness of students to participate in the experiment;
- 4) More work on the raising the willingness of students to be the facilitator and process manager of the group-based communicative classroom;
- 5) More work on raising motivation and encouraging students to be involved in other ways of doing communicative tasks than the traditional ones.

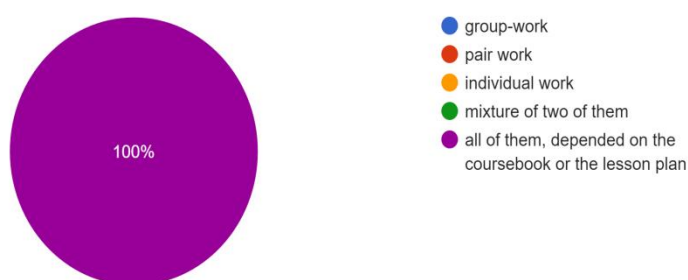
6. Analyzing the results of the questionnaire

After piloting the experiment and analyzing its results, the researcher identified that there was need of more deep analyzes of using L1 during group-based communicative activities and how other teachers, her colleagues dealt with the challenges. As the result, there was done a small scale questionnaire which was sent by emails. Out of 22 lectures, 16 of them returned the filled questionnaire which was formed with three open and four closed questions. Here are the questions and the results.

The first questionnaire was about **type of activities teachers prefer to use** at the lectures. All of them highlighted that it all depends on the coursebook and the lesson plan (Figure 1). Though, the researcher realized later that it would be better not to involve this answer in this question; it would be better to form another question about frequency of doing group-work. This might have shown preference of teachers.

Figure 1

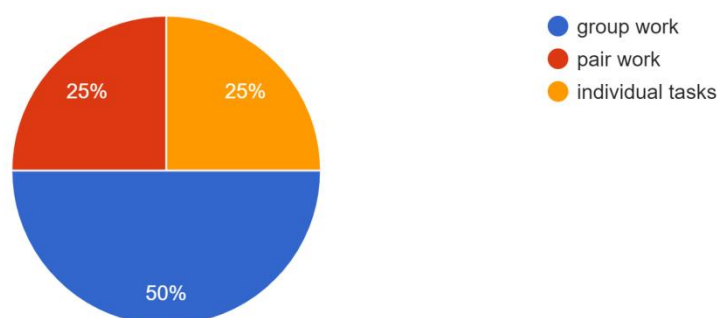
Which kind of activities do you prefer to do?
16 responses



The next question referred to the **type of activities students, not teachers, prefer to do**. As the teacher stated, half of the students prefer to do group work and 50/50 circled pair work and individual tasks (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Which kind of activities do students prefer to do?
16 responses

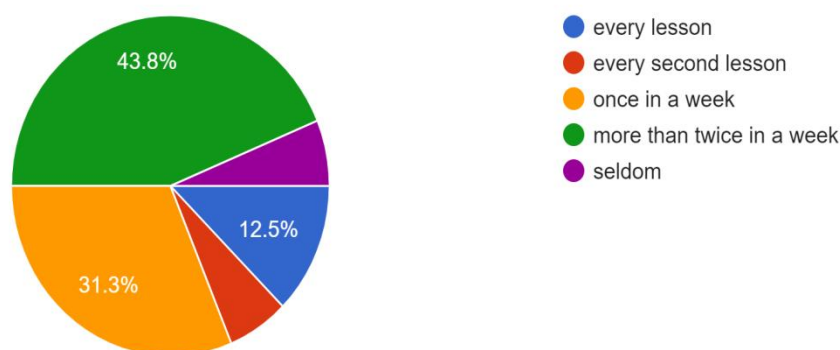


This question was followed by learning about **the frequency of doing group-based communicative activities**. 43% chosen the option "more than twice in a week". In general, students have 4 hours in one subject, so, it means they did it nearly every lesson; though here we had to take into account that teacher mentioned that they conduct group-based communicative activities according to the coursebook and the lesson plan. As it was expected 31.3% of them said that "once in a week"; 12.5% - "every lesson" and so on (see Figure 3). In short, doing the group-based communicative activities at the lesson is frequent.

Figure 3

How often do you do group-based communicative activities?

16 responses



The next question was - "**What challenges do you have to plan group-work?**" Here are some responses of the teachers which emphasized the main challenges of the group-work:

- "Weaker students tend to be shy and neglect expressing their opinions freely; some others students prefer to dominate";
- "Have full engagement of students";
- "Lack of communication and personality conflicts";
- "Considering the size of groups, equal distribution of weak and strong students";
- "Choose an interesting topic";
- "Avoid using students own language"

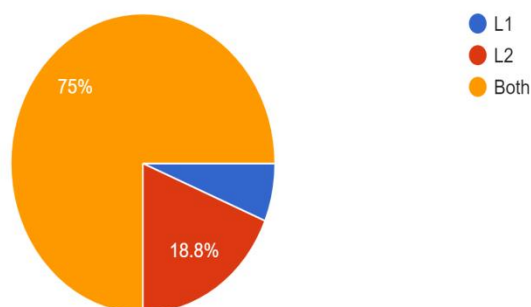
As we can see, avoiding using L1 in group-work was also mentioned by teachers with other challenges of group-work activities while learning L2.

To go in more depth in this direction, the next question the researcher asked was about **the language students use during group-work** and as it was expected (see Figure 4), more teachers circled both (75%); though the researcher realized later that the question should have been asked in a different way, for instance: "Which language do students use mostly while doing group-work?"

Figure 4

Which language do students use while doing group-work?

16 responses



One of the most interesting question for the researcher was to find out - "**What can be done to avoid using L1 in group- based communicative activities?**" Most answers of the teachers were related to that teachers have to a) encourage them using L2 not L1, b) provide them with necessary vocabulary and grammar in advance, which might be needed for group-based communicative activities; c) give an example of using only L2 during the lesson and request the same from the students; d) should not highlight the mistakes students make while using L2 and make trustful environment for them; e) use body language instead of L1; f) make a warning to students that "If they do use L1, their answers will not be considered"; (though, the researcher disagrees using such kind of approach which is not related to raising motivation or encouraging students to do more group-work); g) teach them how to think in L2 (which the researcher considers to be very productive however, it might need a lot of work and time to be achieved).

The last question of the questionnaire was - "**What method have you tried to avoid using L1 in group-based activities or plan to do?**" Sharing colleagues' experience is very important for the teacher who focuses on daily professional growth for the benefit of students. Here are the answers of some teachers:

- "I encourage them to use L2";
- "Communicative language teaching method";
- "To set rules for when and how L1 can be used. To create a flashcard with the students' L1 written on one side";
- "I try to avoid their answers";
- "I repeat the sentence in English and motivate him /her to use L2";
- "Transfer their mindset into the L2 World by implementing the chunking technique".

As the researcher considers, setting the rules while doing group-based communicative activities and involving measurements using L1 during it might be one of the good solution to deal with this challenge. As for avoiding their answers in L1, it might be very strict and demotivating act from the teacher's side.

To summarize the questionnaire, the researcher found it valuable to gather insights from colleagues regarding their experiences and strategies for minimizing L1 use in group work. However, as it was noted in the analysis, some questions required more detailed responses and extended discussions. Consequently, conducting face-to-face interviews following the questionnaire could prove to be more productive for the study.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, some linguists (Atkinson, 1987; Brooks & Donato, 1994; Cook, 2001; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2003) argue that the native language offers advantages for many learners, as the strategies they choose for learning are closely linked to their mother tongue. In contrast, other linguists (Howatt & Widdowson, 2004; Turnbull & Arnett, 2002; Scott & de la Fuente, 2008; Littlewood & Yu, 2009) believe that using the native language in the classroom may hinder the acquisition of a second (cited in Cook, 2001:1-2).

As it was stated by Yüzlü and Atay (2020), in their studies, semi-structured interviews revealed that students favored using L1 because it eased cognitive demands and created a more relaxed classroom environment, which in turn enhanced their L2 speaking abilities. Moreover, students who were permitted to use L1 in a deliberate and structured way outperformed those who were exclusively exposed to L2, both at the low intermediate and high intermediate levels. This approach led to better oral production in L2 and cultivated a positive attitude towards the language.

In conclusion, the researcher's experiment was not as successful as the researcher expected; although the experiment provided valuable experience and the students in the roles of facilitator and process manager (F&PM) performed their duties well, showing improved skills and greater involvement in group work, the primary goal of reducing L1 usage was not achieved. It may be more effective for the teacher to take on the roles of facilitator and process manager, along with other responsibilities during group work, as the teacher is generally more capable of fulfilling these roles successfully.

As Fosch (2017) states: "The teacher should be a facilitator, who facilitates classroom communication and establishes situations and contexts likely to promote communication. The teacher is also a co-communicator, participating in activities with their students. Finally, the teacher should be an advisor when presenting activities, answering questions from students and monitoring their performance".

Finally, As the result of this experiment and the analyzes of the questionnaire, the researcher leaves this question without the answer - "How to avoid using L1 in Group-based communicative English classroom of higher education?" and seeks alternative methods to address this ongoing challenge.

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Appendix 1

Note: Photos taken during the experiment by the permission of the participants of the experiment

Photo 1

Class 1 (there were three groups; student taking the role of F&PM (facilitator and process manager) of the group-work is a boy (he works with the group N1)

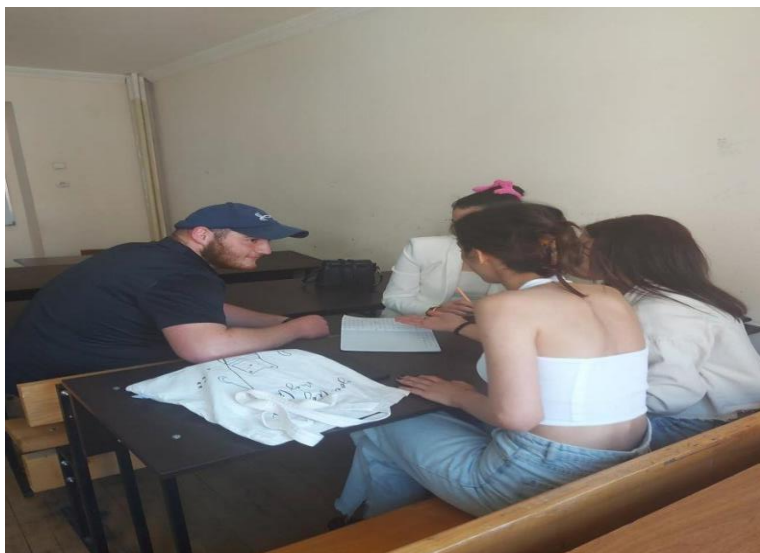


Photo 2 F&PM is standing and leaning to G1



Appendix 2

Note: Photos taken during the experiment by the permission of the participants of the experiment

Photo N1

Class 2 (there were two groups; student taking the role of F&PM (facilitator and process manager) of the group-work is a girl in jeans and white T-shirt on the first photo (she works with the group N2)



Photo N2



Appendix 3

Photos of group-work without F&PM

Note: Photos taken during the experiment by the permission of the participants of the experiment

