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This is Your Brain in Group Work: Anxiety in Communicative Classrooms

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As approaches to language teaching based on interaction between learners (e.g., Communicative Language Teaching; Task-based Language Teaching) have become the norm in many classrooms, group and pair work have come to play a prominent role in language learning. Working in groups or pairs gives learners more opportunities to use English, share information about themselves and build rapport with other learners. It can also help to reduce learners' fears about speaking in front of others. However, for some learners, simply doing pair- or group-work brings about feelings of unease because of social anxiety. When learners work in small groups, they often work with unfamiliar classmates or are placed in situations where they are unsure of what to do. Such situations can be difficult for learners to cope with even in their first language. With the increased cognitive and psychological demands involved when using a second language in pairs or groups, feelings of unease can be amplified, causing discomfort, or even distress. Social anxiety has been shown to play an influential role in learners' attitudes towards working in groups (e.g., Zhou, 2015), and thus placing socially anxious learners into group-learning contexts without due consideration can be detrimental not only to the individual learners, but also to the learning of the group. In this presentation, I discuss situational triggers of anxiety reported by learners and activities to help curb the influence of anxiety based on research into anxiety and classroom experience.

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