

GROUP WORK IMPLEMENTATION IN EFL CLASSROOMS: ENGLISH-MAJORED STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS

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ARTICLE INFO		ABSTRACT
Received:	16/12/2022	Group work has been employed in English as a foreign language (EFL) classes and has become increasingly important. However, little research has been conducted to investigate its implementation from the experiences of EFL learners and their perceptions of group effectiveness. This study addresses this gap. Data were collected at a tertiary institution in the Mekong Delta province through classroom observations (n = 4), questionnaires (n = 297), and semi-structured interviews (n = 10). The findings revealed that a variety of group activities were regularly used in EFL classes, with appropriate time allotments, and the flexibility for students to choose groups, but with a substantial workload for highly productive participants. In terms of group effectiveness, the students stated that group work enhanced feelings of positivity and increased understanding among group members. However, the results also revealed modest use of English among group members during group interaction. The results provide useful insights for group work implementation in EFL classes and call for further modifications of this implementation to increase the use of English in a collective and collaborative context.
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VIỆC TÍCH HỢP HOẠT ĐỘNG NHÓM TẠI CÁC LỚP HỌC TIẾNG ANH: THEO TRẢI NGHIỆM VÀ QUAN ĐIỂM CỦA SINH VIÊN CHUYÊN NGÀNH TIẾNG ANH

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THÔNG TIN BÀI BÁO	TÓM TẮT
Ngày nhận bài: 16/12/2022	Hoạt động nhóm đã được sử dụng phổ biến và ngày càng quan trọng, trong các lớp tiếng Anh (EFL classroom). Tuy nhiên, có rất ít nghiên cứu về việc hoạt động nhóm dựa trên trải nghiệm của những người học và nhận thức của họ về tính hiệu quả của các hoạt động này. Nghiên cứu này nhằm điều tra việc tích hợp hoạt động nhóm tại các lớp học tiếng Anh, dựa theo trải nghiệm và quan điểm của sinh viên chuyên ngành tiếng Anh. Dữ liệu được thu thập tại một trường đại học ở một tỉnh Đồng bằng sông Cửu Long thông qua dự giờ (n = 4), bảng câu hỏi (n = 297) và phỏng vấn bán cấu trúc (n = 10). Kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy nhiều dạng hoạt động nhóm được sử dụng trong các lớp tiếng Anh, với thời gian phù hợp và người học được chọn nhóm, nhưng với phần lớn công việc lại dành cho những người học hoạt động tích cực. Về hiệu quả của nhóm, kết quả cho thấy hoạt động nhóm nâng cao cảm xúc tích cực và tăng cường thấu hiểu giữa các thành viên. Tuy nhiên, kết quả cũng cho thấy mức độ sử dụng tiếng Anh để tương tác của các thành viên trong nhóm còn hạn chế. Kết quả cung cấp những hiểu biết hữu ích về việc áp dụng hoạt động nhóm trong các lớp tiếng Anh và những nhu cầu đổi mới để thúc đẩy việc sử dụng tiếng Anh để hợp tác trong môi trường tập thể.
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1. Introduction

To enhance the English communicative competencies of language learners, the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach has been widely used along with a variety of learner-centered teaching strategies such as group work. In fact, in many L2 classrooms across the world, group work is now a widespread practice as part of a methodological paradigm dominated by communicative and task-based language education [1]. Group work is a strategy to achieve the three primary aspects of language fluency, accuracy, and appropriacy [2].

1.1. Group work definitions and categories

According to Brown [3], group work is a term covering a multiplicity of techniques in which two or more students are assigned a task involving collaboration and self-initiated language. In addition, group work is defined as activities in which learners work mutually as a team or group either for producing a certain product or achieving a fundamental objective [4]. Group work is categorized into three general types including informal learning groups, formal learning groups, and study teams [5]. The first type is *Informal learning groups* which involve temporary clusterings of students within a single class session. The second one is *Formal learning groups* involving teams established to complete a specific task, such as writing a report and carrying out a project. Typically, students work together until the task is finished, and their project is graded. *Study team* is the last type that refers to long-term groups (usually existing over a semester) with stable membership to members with support, encouragement, and assistance in completing the course requirements and assignments.

1.2. Research in group work implementation in EFL classrooms

Research has investigated group work and collaborative learning in general. Some studies have explored factors that influence group work implementation in multicultural contexts such as motivation, friendship, individual trust, cultural diversity, and group formation in higher education such as in the Australasia region [6], [7]. The results revealed that students perceived “trust in the group” and “cultural diversity” as important factors contributing to both behavioral and cognitive engagement. In addition, some studies were conducted in Asian contexts such as China [8], Japan [9], and Vietnam [10], [11] to investigate group work implementation through both teachers’ and students’ perceptions. The shared results highlighted the roles of leadership and friendship in group work and supported the importance of a leader and peer connection in group work activities. The studies conducted in Viet Nam [10], [11] mainly documented teachers’ reports in the relation to how to innovate and improve students’ roles and knowledge contribution in group work activities, and how to maximize the values of the group process. Furthermore, they also reported factors that obstructed students and teachers such as syllabus and lesson length.

Overall, although group work is well-established in today's English language teaching (ELT) education, research on group work implementation in EFL classrooms is scant. There is still a dearth of research concentrating on students’ experiences of group work implementation and their perceptions of group work effectiveness. The current study attempts to find answers to these questions. This study adopted a mixed-methods approach to data collection, including classroom observations, a questionnaire survey, and semi-structured interviews to explore EFL students’ experiences with group work activities and their perceptions of group work effectiveness. The study seeks the answers to two questions:

- How is group work implemented in EFL classrooms at a Vietnamese university?
- How do English-majored students experience group effectiveness?

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

Participants of the study were English-majored students at An Giang University, Vietnam University Ho Chi Minh City (AGU-VNUHCMC). We used convenience sampling to choose the

participants for the questionnaire survey. The sample size formula (commonly known as Slovin's formula) developed by Slovin in 1960 [12] was used to choose participants for our survey. Based on the population size of 1142 students (with $e = 0,05$), we have a sample size of 297 students – as follows:

$$n = 1 + \frac{N}{1 + N * e^2} = 1 + \frac{1142}{1 + 1142 * 0.05^2} = 297,23$$

Symbol meaning

n = sample size

N = population size

e = error margin

We also used convenience sampling to recruit participants for the semi-structured interviews. We invited 10 students who had expressed their willingness to participate in the interviews when they completed the questionnaire. Table 1 describes the profiles of the 10 interview participants:

Table 1. *Participants' profile*

Participants	Age	Gender	Major
S1	18	Female	ELTE
S2	18	Female	ELTE
S3	20	Female	ELTE
S4	20	Female	ELTE
S5	20	Female	ELTE
S6	19	Male	EL
S7	19	Female	EL
S8	19	Female	EL
S9	21	Female	ELTE
S10	21	Female	ELTE

Note:

ELTE: English language teaching education

EL: English linguistics

2.2. Instruments

Classroom observation: Classroom observations were used to collect data related to group work implementation. A note-taking rubric was used for the observation. This rubric was adapted from the sample group work rubric designed by the Center for Teaching Innovation of Cornell University (Ithaca, New York, <https://teaching.cornell.edu/resource/sample-groupwork-rubric>). We observed four classes over a month.

Survey: A questionnaire survey containing the Five-point Likert scale (from 1 – Strongly disagree to 5 – Strongly agree) was completed on paper. This questionnaire was adapted from the one used in a paper entitled an investigation of perceptions of Vietnamese teachers and students toward cooperative learning by Pham [13]. We also did a pilot study for this questionnaire with 30 students and 3 lecturers to validate the two factors:

+ Cronbach's alpha (a measure to assess the reliability): $\alpha > 0.5$ for each statement.

+ Validity: 87.5% in total. With 37/40 statements got > 0.5 .

Interview: Semi-structured interviews were used to collect specific qualitative data from individuals to triangulate with observation and survey data to provide profound conclusions. The interview questions were adapted based on the interview questions designed and used by Le, Janssen, and Wubbels [14].

2.3. Data collection and analysis

The data were collected from classroom observations, a questionnaire survey, and semi-structured interviews to capture an overall picture of group work implementation and the remarkable features of the implementation. The observation data was noted and later analyzed-

explained. Next, SPSS version 22 was used for the analysis of the survey data. Finally, interview data were collected and analyzed in three steps: recording, transcribing (and translating if necessary), and analyzing-explaining through a thematic analysis method [15]. We then triangulated the data to determine the thematic categories' relationships.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1. The implementation of group work in English-majored classrooms

Analysis of the observation, survey, and interview data reveal some common aspects of group work implementation including frequency, kinds of group work, time assignment, and group formation. Table 2 shows the survey results as follows.

Table 2. *The implementation of group work in English-majored classrooms*

Question	Mean	The percentage of students' responses				
		Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Often	Always
1. How often do your language teachers incorporate group activities in the lesson?	4.29	0%	0.3%	11.8%	46.8%	41.1%
2. Do you have enough time to work in groups?	3.60	1.7%	5.1%	36.4%	45.8%	11.1%
3. Do you form your group by yourself?	4.20	1.3%	4.0%	12.1%	38.0%	55.6%

3.1.1. Frequency

Observation data indicated a high frequency of group implementation in EFL classes. This showed that most groups in these classes could immediately understand the teacher's instructions. After a teacher gave instructions, students immediately sat in groups, received some materials such as large-size papers and pens, and started working in groups. Therefore, forming groups or choosing group members did not take much time. The survey results revealed a high mean value of 4.29 for the frequency of group work implementation. Notably, 41.1% of students chose the answer "Always" to indicate that group work was an inevitable part of their learning. Notably, none of the students responded that their classes "Never" used group work. These students, therefore, were used to working in groups. This result was associated with the typical response as follows:

Every course needs group work, for example, in micro-teaching practicing, teachers will always assign a particular lesson for each group to practice, and then, present in class. (S5)

3.1.2. Kinds of group work

Analysis of observation and semi-structured interview data reveals that all kinds of group work reviewed in the literature were used in EFL classrooms at AGU-VNUHCMC. As S7 stated:

I have already experienced all three kinds of groups including informal learning groups, formal learning groups, and study teams. (S7)

Observations and interview results revealed a distinctive point that all kinds of group work were flexibly implemented but students only formed their groups formerly in the first period of the course and tended to stay in their groups during the course no matter what kinds of group work they participated in. To increase the speaking opportunities for students, the teachers employed informal learning groups frequently if they simply wanted the classes to be more energetic and vibrant, as most participants shared:

The informal learning group is very popular to increase the interaction in my class. (S5)

Formal learning groups are generally used in the practice or production stages of the lesson to let students practice or review what they have learned during the assignment. Finally, regarding the study team, most participants agreed that:

The study team is inevitable in every course and accounts for some percent of the final scores. (S9)

Besides, students' preferences for the three kinds of group work are different. Some perceived neutrally whereas S1 and S3 stated that they felt most comfortable when working in a formal group because they could have extra time to prepare and practice and also had a clear target or task to

fulfill inside the classrooms. However, the informal learning group helped S2 and S7 have further comprehensive input by freely interacting with their mates. The three students S4, S5, and S10 regarded the study team as the ineluctable one as in the following illustration:

I prefer study teams with certain group members and more preparation time outside the classrooms before submitting or presenting' (S5).

3.1.3. Time assignment

In the observed classes, most of the groups had enough time to perform an activity. The survey result showed that 45.8% of the responses from participants showed that they "Often" had enough time to work in a group. This result is confirmed by a typical response from the interviewees as follows:

To be honest, when I work in a group, I seldom lack time. (S3)

Besides, there was also a suggestion that the time was enough for students to work regardless of how familiar and easy the exercises were. Still, time scarcity was not a common issue arising in group work because generally, according to many participants, they assumed that their teachers' purpose during group work was to let students learn how to unite and interact freely so they tried to assign enough time for them.

3.1.4. Group Formation

The group size was an arising content related to group work. S1, S3, and S5 also allowed the number of members in each group to be 4 or 5. Obviously, groups should be small to maximize the time allocated for each pupil to express himself or herself. In fact, a large number of students in one group are also the result of large-size classes which could negatively affect students who did not enjoy the wide circle of peers. Again, occasionally because of the difficulty of the exercises, students demanded more members to carry out the tasks. As one following statement reported by S4:

Sometimes my teachers divide more or fewer members in a group like my expectations. It depends on the workload and the time for deadlines. (S4)

The right to choose their group members is another aspect of group work. Through observation, students generally only formed their groups and chose group members formerly in the first period of the course. Also, according to the survey results, when being asked about the right to choose their group members, 55.6% of students agreed that their teachers "Always" allowed them to form their group by themselves (see Table 2). In agreement with this, most interviewees (S1, S2, S3, S5, S8, S9, and S10) reported that they preferred choosing their group mates by themselves. A typical response is as follows:

Teachers should let us choose our group members because this is also our desire. Students need to be free and proactive to decide their group members (S9).

The interview data indicated that students preferred to choose their groupmates by themselves. Otherwise, S4, S6, and S7 report that teachers should decide on group members instead of letting students choose by themselves for numerous considerable reasons.

No one but teachers can understand their student's abilities, and ensure the manpower of every group. (S6)

These students thought that choosing group mates by themselves might make them rely on their friends or be afraid of working with new members. Moreover, they could also improve their communication and problem-solving skills when they worked with new group members. Following the right to form groups independently is the preference for fellowship in group work. Observation data indicated that more than 50% of the groups in the four observed classes worked closely with friends and maintained supportive relationships during group implementation. Obviously, they not only united but also supported the others in their groups and the other groups as much as they could. Many of the participants reported:

When students form groups by themselves, working with their friends is unavoidable. (S5)

I like working with friends or the ones I knew something related to them, because their abilities, strength, and also interests need to be granted. (S7)

3.1.5. Task distribution

Broadly, according to the observation data, we noticed a negative impact of a collective environment in which high-contributing members tended to be overloaded or felt unfair while low- and non-contributing members got into trouble catching up with the tasks and their partners because of both ignoring and being ignored during the group process.

Table 3. *Students' roles and duties when distributing the tasks*

Statement	Number of students	Total score	Mean
1. You always dominate and distribute the work to other members.	297	838	2.82
2. You are always responsible for some parts of the tasks.	297	753	2.54
3. You usually work as a reporter to present the group work results.	297	865	2.91

It is also consistent with the data of the survey (see Table 3). The means of these statements ranging from 2.54 to 2.91 revealed that the students mostly disagreed or were hesitant about their roles and duties. Students who denied working as a leader to distribute work to others also rejected the roles of a reporter or even a normal member.

My group usually divided the work based on members' strengths, but there are still those who do not have clear roles or contributions. (S8)

Based on participants' responses, the students who did not have a particular task generally had no or lower contribution than others who were high-contributing members with specific duties. Therefore, the more productive students in a group felt overburdened or unfair while low- and non-contributing members failed to complete the tasks and had fewer opportunities to communicate with their partners because of both ignoring and being ignored during the group process.

3.2. Group effectiveness

3.2.1. Students' positive feelings when participating in group work

The observation results revealed that most students engaged effectively in groups. They worked happily and actively during and after the group work. In this case, the group works not only took advantage of this relationship but also reinforced and strengthened friend bonds.

Table 4. *Students' feelings when working in groups*

Statement	Number of students	Total score	Mean
4. You are willing to share your ideas when working in groups.	297	1272	4.28
5. You feel confident when sharing your ideas in groups.	297	1132	3.81
6. The atmosphere in your groups is good.	297	1214	4.09

The statistics revealed a good sign that most of the students had positive feelings when collaborating in groups. As Table 4 displays, the means of the three statements related to students' feelings ranging from 3.81 to 4.28 revealed that the students were highly positive towards group work. The high means ($M=4.28$) of responses to Statement 4 showed that students agreed that group work encouraged their willingness to share ideas. With a bit lower mean of 3.81 and 4.09 in the responses to Statements 5 and 6 respectively, it can be implied that most students agreed that confidence and an enjoyable atmosphere were the two important elements contributing to students' positive feelings. As S8 and S1 said:

Students can feel comfortable when working in groups. They can share similar insights and mutual goals. (S8)

3.2.2. Students' better mutual understanding

Table 5. *Students' understanding when working in a group*

Statement	Number of students	Total score	Mean
7. You can understand the tasks deeply when discussing them in groups.	297	1103	3.71
8. Your groups can finish the tasks or assignments on time.	297	1251	4.21
9. Your group can produce accurate answers to questions and tasks.	297	1011	3.40
10. You always use English to communicate in groups.	297	864	2.91

Despite the above reluctance about roles and duties in groups, a high mean score ranging from 3.40 to 4.21 in the responses to Statements 7, 8, and 9 indicated that students possibly achieved acceptable answers on time. Such high means score suggested positive outcomes and a mutual understanding among students. This result is thus consistent with the positive feelings revealed above (see Table 4). The students were still willing to share their ideas, so a better understanding among group members is a visible result. According to Table 5, finishing the assignments on time was also common as 4.21 in the mean of the statement supported this aspect. This suggested that most groups could finish the tasks on time thanks to how thoroughly they understood the lesson. In this case, group work provides students with more objective ideas, as S9 supported:

No one is "perfect", the more people work together, the more ideas we can have, then every issue can be solved. (S9)

Besides, most groups could complete the task with a high level of accuracy and appropriate answers thanks to group work, as the statements of S9 and S10:

We have 80% -90% correct answers when working together. (S9 and S10)

3.3. Limited English proficiency in group communication

There are still emerging problems related to the use of English in group discussions. Through observation results, more than 50% of the groups preferred using both Vietnamese and English to discuss. Most of them preferred using Vietnamese to discuss, then translating their answers into English before submitting them. Likewise, statistics from the survey ($M = 2.91$) (see Table 5) also shows that most of them were still reluctant to use English to communicate in groups. The interview data also support these results, some participants explained the differences in the English proficiency level of each member:

I still prefer speaking English because it is good for me. However, to make sure that everyone can understand and work as fast as possible, I still have to use Vietnamese in my group. (S2)

Some participants like S5 also thought this was a common problem for most of the Vietnamese students. It was hard to ensure that everyone in the group could understand what their members said in English while they needed a clear understanding to complete the task on time.

4. Conclusion

Group work is apparently a renowned and doable collaborative learning strategy in EFL classes and thus, becomes familiar to students. Nevertheless, in recent years, few studies have been conducted to investigate the implementation of group work through EFL students' experiences and their perceptions of group effectiveness. This study reported that all kinds of group work were widely and frequently implemented in English classrooms with a variety of group activities in EFL classrooms. Appropriate time, and the right of students to choose groups were revealed through data of observation, survey, and interview. Notably, the overburdened work for highly productive participants related to unfair task distribution is also noticeable. In terms of group effectiveness, the findings reported feelings of positivity and an increase in understanding among group members. However, limited use of English in group communication was reported as a constraining factor to group effectiveness. This study offers practical suggestions for a more efficient application of group work activities in EFL lessons. The findings have significant ramifications for educators and teacher trainers in light of the need to improve young Vietnamese learners of English communicative skills.

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