

CHALLENGES IN GROUP WORK ACTIVITIES OF STUDENTS IN NON-MAJOR ENGLISH CLASSES

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Abstract.

Group work is vital in collaborative learning because it gives students chances to develop language fluency and build communication abilities. The study examined students' issues in group work, including students' attitudes and difficulties through group work activities in non-major English courses. A significant majority of students showed interest in group work as an efficient way to improve their language skills, yet a few students displayed no interest and demonstrated neutral and negative attitudes toward group work. This research uses qualitative methods, such as surveys and quantitative statistical analysis, to collect data through mixed-methods approaches. Research outcomes demonstrate that well-designed group assignments with appropriate group sizes together with helpful guidance boost language learning outcomes through group interaction. The study suggests that some significant modifications would improve the success of group work activities. The suggestions aim to boost student participation in addition to optimizing collaborative learning outcomes for subjects outside the English major.

Keywords. group work activities, issues in group work, non-major English courses.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the past few years, there have been numerous developments in the teaching and learning of foreign languages. Despite varying national opinions on educational objectives, there is a general agreement that schools should improve student readiness for life and enhance their ability to use their knowledge in real-world scenarios. Hence, educators must investigate various methods to involve students in classroom participation as much as they can. Collaborative tasks in the classroom are crucial for boosting communication skills as they allow the group to achieve higher productivity compared to individuals working independently. It enables every participant to concentrate on the task and potential issues, resulting in each student being able to accomplish more in less time, typically. According to Davis (1993), group work helps students grasp and retain information better than other teaching methods. Xu also mentions that group work creates a positive emotional environment.

Collaborative tasks enhance students' social engagement within the classroom. Group work encourages students to develop their ability to be flexible and work independently (as referenced in Wang 2009, p. 30). Nevertheless, despite these notable benefits, numerous issues stem from this method of operation. Afares (2017) pointed out that certain students encountered challenges in group projects mainly due to lack of collaboration, shyness, and time wastage. The goal of this study is to investigate the obstacles that students in non-major English courses at a university face during group projects. The research aims to investigate the reasons behind students' negative opinions towards group projects, or whether the ineffectiveness of group work is caused by a lack of collaboration, excessive use of the native language, or inappropriate group size. It addresses the research query: "What challenges do students encounter in non-major English classes when collaborating in groups?" From that point on, the study offers some recommendations for addressing the issues.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In the literature review, the study mentions collaborative efforts, goals set by a team, the size of the group, different kinds of group activities, a review of previous studies, and a research gap.

2.1. Collaborative efforts

Researchers have varying definitions of group work, depending on the aspect they are focusing on. According to Dunkin (1987), group work allows students to exchange ideas and interpretations with each

other, helping them to express and shape their understanding of a subject (p. 288). According to Brown (2001), group work encompasses various methods where two or more students collaborate on a task that requires working together and using their initiative in language use. It involves working in groups with a small number of students, typically around six or fewer (Marlene, 2005, p. 6). Cullingford (1995) also characterized group work as a method to create opportunities for students to orally address challenging problems or situations.

Some significant factors should be emphasized based on these definitions. The initial one is collaboration. Students are required to collaborate to finish the assignment. True collaboration within a team happens when each member is conscious of their individual duties and obligations and performs their assigned task to the best of their ability. Secondly, students apply their knowledge and classroom learning to interact with their peers during class. The third highlighted the advantages of teamwork by pointing out the need for students to communicate and discuss their ideas out loud.

2.2. Goals set by a team

The Victoria University of Wellington (1990) offers five suggestions for how group work can enhance the learning process. Group work offers learners the opportunity to experience a language they can understand while also encountering unfamiliar elements to learn from. Group work provides learners with the opportunity to be exposed to diverse language items and language functions. It will often be necessary to pre-teach the necessary language items. Group work provides increased chances of utilizing new materials compared to teacher-led classes. Group work improves students' proficiency in utilizing language elements they have previously acquired. The reasons for group work for learning new things also apply to improving skills in using those things. Group work allows learners to acquire communication techniques. Some of these tactics include negotiation tactics such as asking for clarification, seeking confirmation, checking to understand, repeating information, ways to maintain a conversation, compensating for a limited vocabulary or lack of fluency, and managing extended speaking opportunities.

2.3. Size of the group

Most researchers concur that small groups are preferable due to the disadvantages associated with large groups: students may become passive spectators rather than active contributors, and they may not get enough chances to speak due to the high number of participants. According to Davis (1993), students can decrease freeloading and conflicts among group members in small group work. In the meantime, Chi mentioned that a group of four, also known as a quad, is typically seen as the best option because it can include students with various opinions, backgrounds, and ways of learning to assist in solving problems. Even if a group member does not log in, the group can still operate efficiently (Chi, 2008, p. 58).

Nunan (1999) states that students who are quiet in larger groups will participate more in discussions when the group size is decreased to five or three (Marlene, 2005, p. 3).

The group's size is a crucial factor that will impact the behavior and emotions of its members. Therefore, teachers must remain adaptable in managing the size of groups when it comes to the discussion topic for each class.

2.4. Different kinds of group activities

Teachers utilize two primary types of groups when assigning group work to their students. One of the options is heterogeneous grouping. This refers to organizing students based on their varying levels of abilities. The next is uniform grouping. It involves organizing students based on their proficiency level.

According to Slavin (1993), groups are considered heterogeneous when they consist of students with diverse instructional levels. Diverse groups in education are based on the idea that students with different levels of learning can collaborate and support each other to achieve a common instructional objective. At the same time, homogeneous groups consist of students with similar instructional levels who work on materials appropriate for their level, based on assessments.

When students work in groups that are all the same, they can share certain characteristics. Students highly value these elements (Liu & Hansen, 2002, p. 65). That is also a requirement for a group to function efficiently.

When students work in groups that are similar in composition, they can benefit from a range of viewpoints. Additionally, students who excel in a group setting can elaborate on their ideas to aid in better

retention and deeper understanding of their knowledge. Yet, there are certain drawbacks to having a diverse group. Less capable students may hide behind more skilled ones and effectively disappear from sight. While stronger students may assist weaker students, they may not perceive the relationship to be mutually advantageous. (Liu & Hansen, 2002, p. 65)

Ultimately, the selection of group type is crucial for the group's efficiency. An experienced teacher should carefully select the most suitable group for their students based on the points discussed earlier.

2.5. Review of Previous Studies

Group work has been extensively studied in the context of language learning, with research highlighting both its benefits and challenges. While collaborative learning can enhance language acquisition and foster a supportive learning environment, several studies have identified notable difficulties associated with group work.

Alfares (2017) investigated learners' perceptions of group work in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes in Saudi Arabia. The study revealed that, despite recognizing the cognitive and motivational benefits of group work, students faced challenges related to uncooperative behaviors among group members. Such behaviors hindered effective collaboration and limited the potential advantages of group activities.

Similarly, Do and Le (2019) conducted research to investigate English major students' attitudes toward group work together with their English utilization in group activities at Dong Thap University. Research findings showed that group work benefits students, but they encounter various difficulties during teamwork. Research results showed that students faced two main problems within their groups: some individuals controlled discussions while others stayed quiet and group members had trouble communicating effectively. Furthermore, research by Alshuraim (2017) highlighted challenges in mixed-ability classes, noting that such settings can be detrimental to students' learning experiences. The study emphasized that mixed-ability groups often face difficulties in maintaining balanced participation, leading to frustration among members and reduced learning outcomes.

Duyen and Huan (2017) conducted a study at a Vietnamese university examining factors influencing group work among EFL students. They identified major challenges such as mixed ability levels, differing viewpoints, and unequal participation, which often led to conflicts and reduced learning effectiveness. The study emphasized that without structured guidance, weaker students may become overly dependent on stronger peers, and dominant individuals may prevent quieter students from engaging fully (Duyen & Huan, 2017).

These studies underscore the importance of addressing the challenges inherent in group work to maximize its effectiveness in language learning contexts. Educators are encouraged to implement strategies that promote equitable participation, establish clear group norms, and provide guidance to mitigate uncooperative behaviors, thereby enhancing the overall learning experience.

2.6. Research gap

While previous research has explored both student perceptions and specific challenges, these studies primarily examine broad patterns rather than focusing on the unique difficulties faced by non-major English students. This study aims to address this gap by identifying practical barriers and proposing targeted pedagogical strategies. This study addresses this gap by identifying key challenges non-major English students encounter and proposing targeted strategies to overcome them. Unlike earlier studies, which primarily highlight student attitudes, this research emphasizes practical issues and pedagogical solutions.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative research. The study was conducted among 100 first-year students aged between 18 and 20 years. Non-major English classes at a university are offered in non-major English classes. There are a total of 45 male students and 55 female students. The majority of students are of the female gender. The majority of them (88%) had been learning English for 12 years, reaching an intermediate to upper-intermediate level of proficiency. 12% of the students have learned English for seven years. As was observed, the students performed well. They have varying levels of English proficiency, but they all participate in English language instruction.

They were given far too much emphasis in secondary and high school. The use of grammar is essential. In the classroom, students were often not required to work in groups.

The data was collected using a questionnaire with multiple-choice questions. The questionnaire comprised ten inquiries about group work preferences and group work types. And groups with difficulties in Vietnamese to facilitate its comprehension. The analysis was carried out with several steps, following the basic principles of an inductive, qualitative content analysis. To carry out the analysis of the quantitative data collected, we performed a descriptive statistical analysis, which included preparing, organizing, and reporting the data. In the first step, the researcher tried to make sense of the data by transcribing a thorough reading of the answers. The second phase consisted of organizing the data. The third phase addressed the presentation of the process of analysis and the results.

3.2. The results and the discussions

Below is a graph that demonstrates the students' preference for group work.

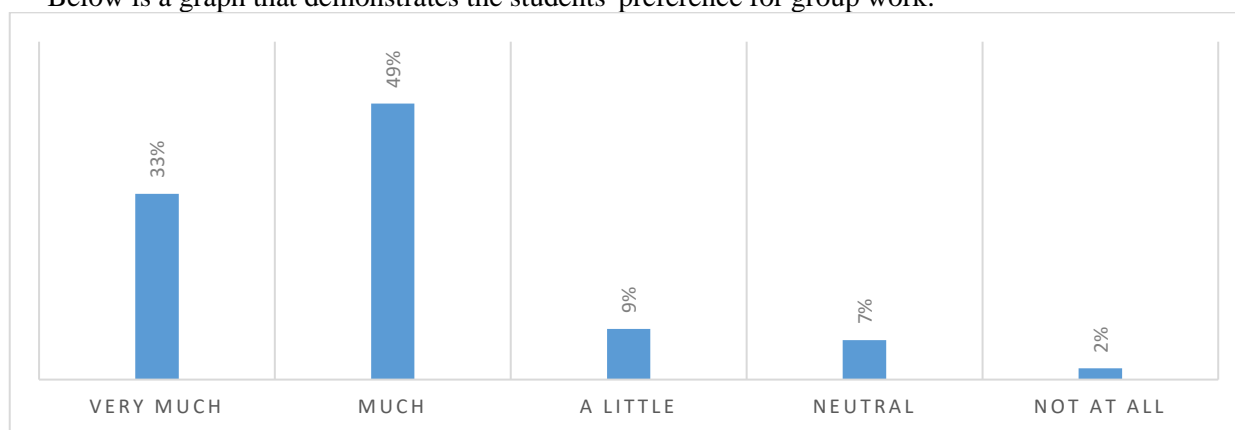


Figure 1: Students' preference for group work

Figure 1 demonstrates that the students displayed a highly positive disposition toward group work. Approximately 33% of the students were fond of this type of group work, and 49% liked it. 9% of students expressed little interest in group work, and 7% expressed neutral concern. Only 2% of the students reported possessing a negative attitude. From the results, most likely the students eagerly anticipated opportunities to collaborate in a group setting within the classroom. They asserted that since this methodology was very important, they enjoyed taking part in group work. They considered that they learned the best that way.

There exist several reasons why the students encountered difficulties in collaborative work. The difficulties ranked from the highest percentage to the lowest one were outlined in the subsequent table (Table 1).

Table 1: Student's difficulties in group work

Difficulties in group work	Percentage
Overuse of native language	84%
There are not many new words	82%
Expressions of ideas	60%
Having a disagreement	40%
When ideas are rejected, losing face can be embarrassing.	36%
Someone takes over the group.	35%
Results are not fair.	25%
Students who are conservative.	24%
I am concerned about ending the relationship.	22%
Results are not fair.	20%
Students who are conservative.	23%
I am concerned about ending the relationship.	24%
I am concerned about ending the relationship.	33%
Several students are not cooperative.	34%

Certain students are afraid to express their ideas.	36%
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The study reveals how students experience emotions instead of actual problems related to group work. The research showed that the most frequent problem arose from native language excess since 84% of students reported excessive Vietnamese usage. Student responses about native language dominance act as a reflection of their language preference preferences instead of actual communication barriers. Students who reported vocabulary difficulties (82%) demonstrated their dissatisfaction with current vocabulary resources but did not consider these limitations as unmanageable barriers because they wanted to communicate their thoughts (82%).

Students face significant challenges when it comes to the emotional aspects of communicating within their group. Student difficulties in expressing ideas affected 60% of the population but could be linked to a confidence problem rather than impaired group work competency. Students experienced conflicts in their groups, which resulted in 40% of students avoiding discussions and 36% withdrawing from offering ideas after facing rejection. The responses display emotional reactions that stem from group interaction challenges as opposed to structural issues in the group.

Students report feeling discomfort instead of encountering objective barriers because of perceived dominance among group members (35%) and unequal workloads (25%). Students who avoid voicing their opinions while also hesitating to lead others comprise 59% of the total who report negative group work experiences.

The study shows different student concerns, but most responses point to emotional, and psychological feelings such as lack of confidence, frustration, and anxiety instead of structural organizational issues that inhibit group work effectiveness.

Figure 2 summarizes the percentage of the students' preference for group types.

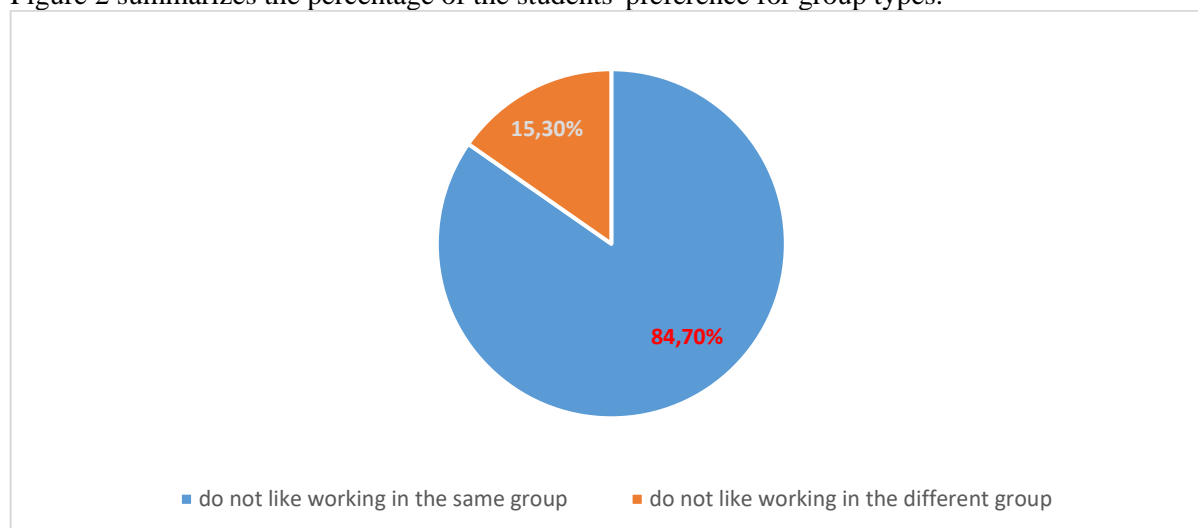


Figure 2: The students' preferences for group types

The graph presented below depicts the difficulties encountered by students when working in different groups (Figure 3).

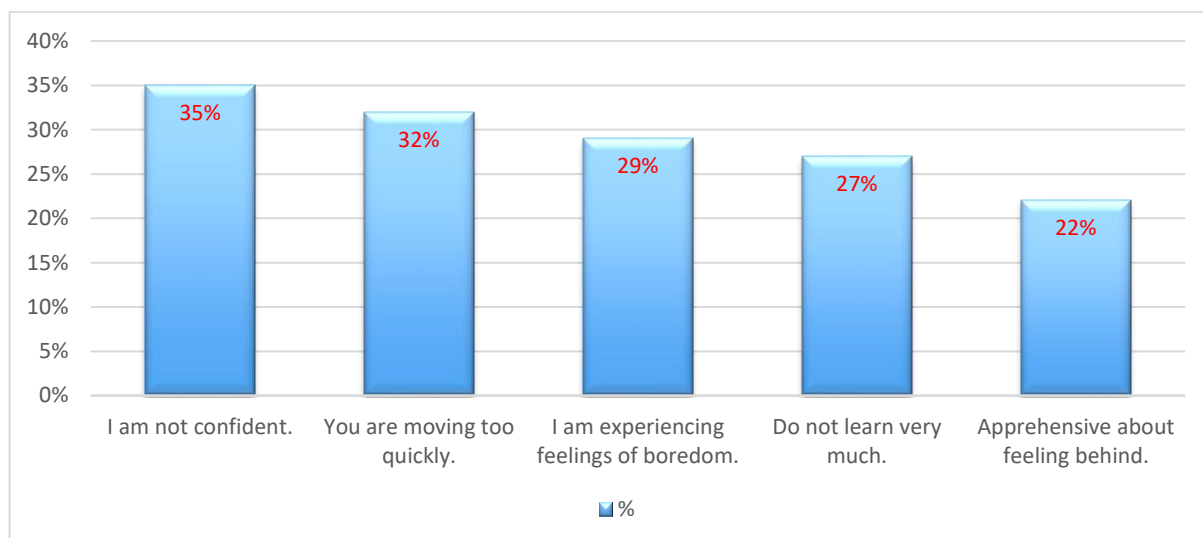


Figure 3: Students' difficulties when working in a different group

Most of the participants (84%) expressed that working within mixed groups produced no encouraging environment. Participants indicated that their reluctance to speak up stemmed from grammar and pronunciation uncertainty along with the too-quick pace of some members who prevented others from participation. The pace of slower-working peers created difficulties for 25% of students who took additional responsibilities to protect good results. Students reported that mixed-level class organization created difficulties for their learning because they faced issues in following group discussions and classmates who had already learned the discussed material. Students reported that group members losing concentration for longer periods led to reduced efficiency because all members had to wait for the slowest learner during lessons.

Below is a graph that illustrates student difficulties when working in the same group. (Figure 4)

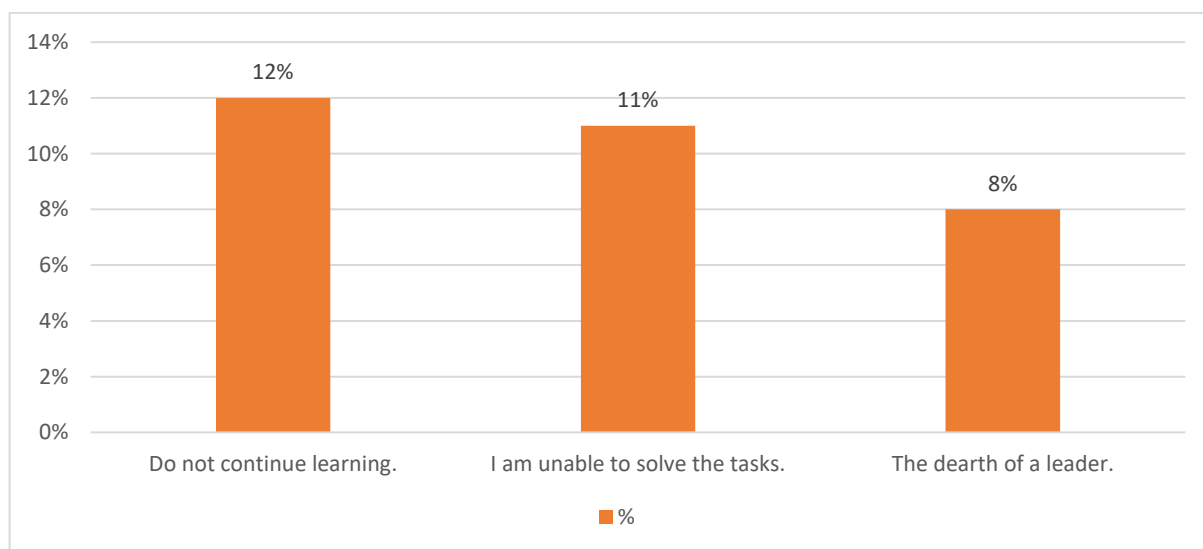


Figure 4: Students' difficulties when working in a different group

A total of 23% of students indicated their disapproval of working in groups made up of similar peers according to Figure 3. Students representing twelve percent of the sample responded negatively to group working because this method prevented students from developing since it failed to increase lower-level student performance levels. Some students highlighted the negative impact of homogenous groups because these groups restricted deepening discussions and valuable knowledge discovery. A significant 11% of students believed tackling complicated assignments became harder when most advanced students were absent. Only 8% of students reported issues with task comprehension because their level matched the group members, which resulted in a lack of guidance from advanced peers. The lack of adequate guidance during

assignments and periods of motivation could create problems for students in both progress and retention of drive.

Below is a graph illustrating the student's preference for group size. (Figure 5)

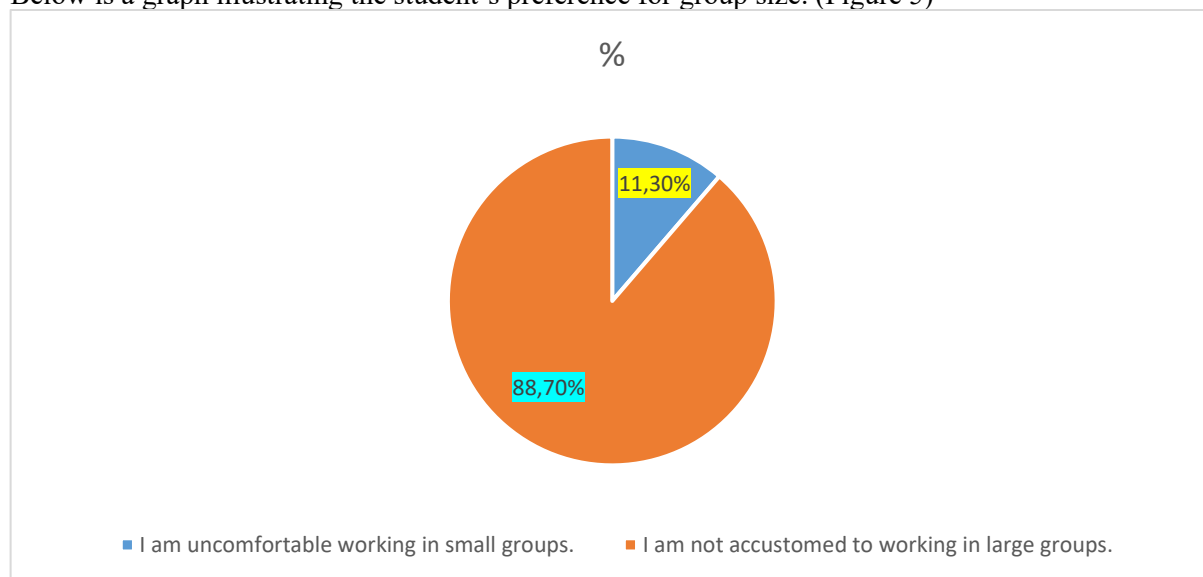


Figure 5: The students' preference towards group size.

The vast majority (88.7%) of students selected four members as their preferred number when working together in groups. A tiny minority totaling just 11.3% did not approve of working with small groups. Davis (1993) confirmed that four group members create optimal conditions for balanced interaction and productive collaboration.

4. CONCLUSION & SUGGESTION

Research data shows both student preferences and their experiences regarding various group work arrangements. Students participate in heterogeneous teams to receive different viewpoints, although they sometimes refrain from sharing their ideas because they are worried about language mistakes, and spontaneous group members who work quickly. Students studying at equivalent proficiency levels tend to find peace in less diverse groups, but these settings restrict their learning opportunities as well as limit various opinions. A majority of students choose group sizes of four because this number ensures balanced participation levels and a productive teamwork dynamic. The study establishes that student emotions directly affect their connection to group activities and their learning outcomes throughout collaborative work. The results indicate that educational groups must balance intellectual advantages with student satisfaction levels to achieve peak collaborative achievement.

The paper reviews some of the literature on group work and improves the understanding of students' attitudes and challenges in group work. The data demonstrated that group work is a common strategy for collaborative learning. It was adopted in all the classrooms surveyed. Most participants had a positive attitude towards using group work activities in English lessons and claimed that this method of learning was an effective way to improve their speaking skills. For a group to function, it is essential to respect the principle of face-to-face interaction. All members of the group must have the opportunity to gaze at each other.

A small group of four may be the best choice because most of the students reported that in large groups of more than four people, they did not have a lot of chances to practice English. They had to wait for the opinions of their partners. Furthermore, the results indicated that students had difficulties working in groups. These issues can lead to ineffective English learning. By highlighting the challenges, the researcher contributed to a deeper understanding of the issues encountered during group work.

The study proposes several recommendations to enhance group learning and communication in face-to-face classes in order to facilitate learning and instructional diversity. Teachers should explain the purpose and benefits of group work, emphasizing how group work will help them achieve the course learning outcomes. Teachers ought to select a suitable group learning task. It should be relevant to the course

objectives and be complex for students' abilities. Furthermore, it is imperative that the criteria of the tasks are clearly stated in order for students to comprehend their objectives and attain them more efficiently and expeditiously. Teachers should consider group size when choosing a group size. The group size depends on the difficulty of the task. If the task is straightforward, it is preferable to work in pairs. Teachers expect students to produce as many ideas as possible without evaluating them. All ideas are carefully listened to but are not commented on. They are usually written on paper so that everyone can see them. When a large number of ideas have been generated and listed, the group will be able to categorize and examine them. Subsequently, the group ought to reach an agreement to select from among the concepts. Encourage students who are shy. If some group members speak too much, teachers suggest setting time limits and some rules, such as no one speaking for longer than 1 minute, no interrupting, no critical comment on people, and only ideas.

If one member of the group exhibits dominance, the group may respectfully acknowledge that the duration is limited. Teachers should assign different tasks to different students. This would force lazy, shy, noisy, or irresponsible students to work hard and participate as much as the other group members. For example, let the lazy learners be the reporter, the noisy learners the secretary, and the sheepish learners the leader. In order to prevent excessive utilization of the target language, Brown (2001) recommends "encouraging students to practice using the target language in face-to-face settings and educating them on the significance of real-life applications for English in their daily lives" (Marlene, 2005, p. 5).

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NHỮNG THÁCH THỨC TRONG HOẠT ĐỘNG LÀM VIỆC NHÓM CỦA SINH VIÊN TRONG CÁC LỚP TIẾNG ANH KHÔNG CHUYÊN

NGUYỄN THỊ TUYẾT HẠNH

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Tóm tắt. Nghiên cứu được thực hiện để kiểm tra thái độ và khó khăn của học sinh thông qua các hoạt động làm việc nhóm trong các lớp học tiếng Anh. Các phát hiện chỉ ra rằng các sinh viên có quan điểm khác nhau về nhóm. Tuy nhiên, phần lớn trong số họ bày tỏ sự quan tâm đến việc làm việc trong một nhóm và coi đó là một phương tiện hiệu quả để nâng cao trình độ ngôn ngữ của họ. Đặc biệt, các sinh viên thể hiện sự yêu thích đối với loại nhiệm vụ này. Tôi thấy nó thú vị. Một số ít sinh viên bày tỏ sự thiếu quan tâm và thể hiện mối quan tâm trung lập về công việc nhóm, chỉ có một tỷ lệ nhỏ bày tỏ thái độ tiêu cực. Các phát hiện đã chứng minh rằng sinh viên gặp nhiều vấn đề khác nhau khi họ tham gia vào công việc nhóm, chẳng hạn như lạm dụng ngôn ngữ bản địa, tranh luận, mất mặt hoặc bị kiểm soát. Từ nghiên cứu, có ý kiến cho rằng có một số sửa đổi đáng kể sẽ cải thiện sự thành công của các hoạt động làm việc nhóm.

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