



Research Article

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

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ABSTRACT

The study was carried out to investigate students' attitudes and difficulties through group work activities in English classes. The results showed that students had different viewpoints about group work; however, most of them were interested in working in a group and considered it an effective way to improve their language skills. In particular, 33% of the students were fond of this type of work and 49% of them liked it. Nine percent of students expressed little interest and 7% showed neutral concern about group work, only 2% of the students reported having a negative attitude. The findings also demonstrated that students experienced various problems when they were involved in group work like overuse of native language, arguments, losing face or being controlled, shy... From the study, it is suggested some significant modifications for more successful implementation of group work activities.

Keywords: group work activities; non-major English classes; problems

1. Introduction

Recent years have witnessed a lot of changes in foreign language learning and teaching. Despite national differences about educational goals, a broad social consensus has revealed that schooling needs to prepare students better for life and help them to apply their knowledge in situations of real life. Therefore, teachers need to explore as many means as possible to enable students to participate in classroom activities. Group work is one of the most important interactional contexts for promoting communication in the classroom because it enables the group as a whole to be more productive than individuals working on their own. It allows each member to focus on the task and the problem that might arise and each student can usually get a lot more done in a shorter amount of time. As Davis (1993) states, “group work enhances students to learn more of what is taught and retain it longer than the same content is presented in other instructional formats.” (p.3) Xu also pointed out that “group work provides a psychologically positive affective climate. Group work

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promotes learners' social interaction in the classroom. Group work initiated learner's "flexibility and independence" (as cited in Wang 2009, p.30). However, despite these significant advantages, many problems originate from this way of working. Afares (2017) denoted that some learners identified issues in group work mostly related to limited cooperation, shyness, and waste of time. This research aims to examine what difficulties the students in non-major English classes at Quy Nhon University encounter through group work. The study wants to find out why learners express negative views of group work, or if group work is not effective due to a lack of cooperation, the overuse of the mother tongue, the inappropriate group size. It answers the following research question: "**What problems do students in non-major English classes meet when working in groups during English classes?**" From there, the research proposes some suggestions to overcome the problems.

2. Literature review

2.1. Group work

There are different definitions of group work, depending on which aspect of it that researchers focus on. According to Dunkin (1987), "group work is a discussion of academic work that affords students the opportunity ideas and interpretation with each other and to give expression and hence form to their understanding of a subject" (p.288). In Brown's opinion (2001), "group work is a generic term covering a multiplicity of techniques in which two or more students are assigned a task that involves collaboration and self-initiated language. It implies small group work, that is, students in groups of perhaps six or fewer" (cited by Marlene, 2005, p.6). Group work was also defined by Cullingford (1995) as the way to develop and create conditions for students to deal with difficult problems or situations orally.

From these definitions, some important factors should be highlighted. The first one is cooperation. Students have to work together for the completion of the task. Real cooperation in group work occurs when everyone is aware of his/her responsibility and role and does the task in the best way possible. The second is that students use what they know and have learned in class to communicate with others in the classroom. The third emphasized the benefits of group work based on its requirements such as expressing and comparing students' ideas verbally.

2.2. Group goals

Victoria University of Wellington (1990) suggests five ways in which group work can help learning.

- Negotiation of input: group work provides an opportunity for learners to get exposure to language that they can understand and which contains unknown items for them to learn.
- New language items: Group work gives learners exposure to a range of language items and language functions. This will often require preteaching of the needed language items.

Group work provides more opportunities for the use of the new items compared to the opportunities in teacher-led classes.

- Fluency: Group work allows learners to develop fluency in the use of language features that they have already learned. The arguments supporting group work for learning new items also apply to developing proficiency in the use of these items.

- Communication strategies: group work allows learners to learn communication strategies. These strategies include negotiation strategies to control input (seeking clarification, seeking confirmation, checking comprehension, repetition), strategies to keep a conversation going, strategies to make up for a lack of language items or a lack of fluency in the use of such items and strategies for managing long turns in speaking.

- Content: Particularly where English is taught through the curriculum, a goal of group work may be the mastery of the content of the curriculum subject the learners are studying.

2.3. Group size

Almost of researchers agreed with small groups because a large group can have several drawbacks: it is easy for students to become passive observers rather than active participants; students may not get the opportunity to speak frequently because there are so many people. As said by Davis (1993), in small group work, students can “reduce the chance of freeloading and conflict between group members” (p.23). Meanwhile, Chi stated that “Four, or a quad, is generally considered the ideal because the group is large enough to contain students who will bring diverse opinions, experiences, and learning styles to aid in problem-solving. If a group member fails to log in, the group can continue to function smoothly” (Chi, 2008, p.58).

Nunan (1999) also says that “students who remain silent in groups of ten or more will contribute actively to discussions when the size of the group is reduced to five or three” (cited by Marfene, 2005, p.3).

The size of a group is an important variable and will influence the behaviour and feelings of individual members. So, teachers need to be flexible in group size control with the discussion topic of each lesson.

2.4. Types of group work

There are two main types of groups that teachers use when having their students work in a group. The first one is heterogeneous grouping. This means grouping students of different ability levels. The second is homogenous grouping. It simply means grouping students who are similar in their level of fluency.

Slavin (1993) stated that heterogeneous groups are groups that include students with a wide variety of instructional levels. Heterogeneous Groups stem from the education precept that a positive interdependence can arise from students with varied learning levels working together and helping each other to reach an instructional goal. Meanwhile, homogeneous groups are groups organized so that students of similar instructional levels are placed

together, working on materials suited to their particular level, as determined through assessments.

When working in homogeneous groups, students can have some elements in common. These elements are “highly valued by students” (Liu & Hansen, 2002, p.65). That is also one criterion for a group to work effectively.

When working in homogeneous groups, students can get a variety of perspectives. What is more, the better students in a group can elaborate their ideas to others, which helps them to remember, and understand more thoroughly their knowledge. However, the heterogeneous group has some disadvantages. Weaker learners may dodge behind stronger ones and thus become ‘invisible.’ “Although weaker students may be helped by stronger students, the stronger students may not feel that the relationship is reciprocally beneficial”. (Liu & Hansen, 2002, p.65).

In conclusion, the choice of type of group is very important in the group’s effectiveness. From the things mentioned above, an experienced teacher should consider carefully choosing the best type of group for his/her students.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research methodology

The study was conducted among 100 first-year students from 18 to 20 years old in non-major English classes at Quy Nhon University. A total of 45 students are male and 55 students are female. Most of them (88%) have been learning English for 12 years. Among the rest, 12% of the students have learned English for seven years. As observed, the students have very different levels, yet they share one thing in common: the instruction in English that they received in their secondary and high schools put far too much emphasis on grammar. In the classroom, the students were not often required to work in groups.

Data were collected through a questionnaire with multiple-choice questions. The questionnaire contained 10 questions, concerning group work preference, group work types, and group work 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 transcription of thorough reading of the answers. The second phase consisted of organizing the data by classifying them. The third phase addressed the presentation of the process of analysis and the results.

3.2. Results and discussions

Below is the graph describing the students’ preference for group work.

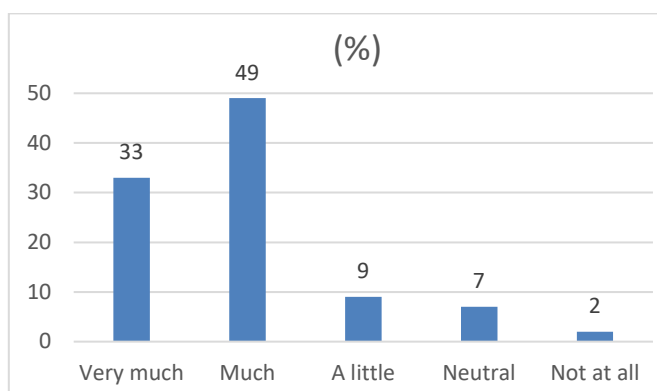


Figure 1. Students' preference for group work

Figure 1 shows that the students showed a very positive attitude towards group work. Approximately 33% of the students were fond of this type of group work, 49% of them liked it, 9% of students expressed little interest, 7% showed neutral concern to group work, and only 2% of the students reported having a negative attitude. From the results, likely, most of the students looked forward to chances to work in a group in the classroom. They claimed that this methodology was very important and that they liked to take part in group work since they considered they learned best that way.

There are several reasons why the students had difficulties in group work. These difficulties ordered from the highest percentage to the lowest one were described in the following table (Table 1).

Table 1. Students' problems in group work

Problems in group work	Percentage
Overuse of native language	82%
Lack of new words	80%
Expressions of ideas	60%
Having arguments	36%
Losing face when ideas are rejected	32%
Someone takes control of the group	31%
Unfair results	21%
Conservative students	19%
Afraid of breaking off the relationship	18%
Certain students are uncooperative	16%
Certain students are too shy to express ideas	15%

The most common problem of working in a group is the use of native language. The results also show that 82% of the students agreed that the use of Vietnamese was too much. This represented a disadvantage of group work. As observed, this was true even in teacher-fronted classes, the students made use of any opportunity to switch to their native language. This was because they lacked English words to express their ideas. Vocabulary is the second biggest problem, occupying 80%. Ranking in third (60%) is the difficulty of expressing ideas

to other members in groups. The students did not know how to express their ideas with clarity. Furthermore, 36% of the students also said that certain members in groups did not get along with each other. They often had arguments, which would waste time and lead to an unproductive group and delayed decision-making. About 32% of the students stated that when their ideas were not accepted, they felt unconfident. So, they did not want to contribute anymore. There were also 31% of students who admitted that someone in the group took control and did not allow others to share their knowledge. As observed, when there was one dominant student, others did not learn how and why things were done but only copied the information. About 21% of them affirmed that the results were not fair because not everyone in the group participated. Some people relied on others to do the work for them. These students usually received the same grade, which was not fair to the students in the group who did all of the work. Around 19 % of students thought that some members were conservative. Therefore, it was very hard to make common opinions. It is interesting to know that 18% of the students rarely gave comments although they did not agree with their partners because they were afraid of breaking off the relationships with their friends. They lost chances to express their opinions. Moreover, 16% of them said that certain members were uncooperative. Neither did they want to share their ideas nor concentrate on the discussion. They chatted when asked to work in groups. Around 15% of the students inquired claimed they have never, or rarely, acted as their group spokesperson. Admittedly, this might happen because some students were less confident than others and found it harder to interact with the other members of the group, or maybe they were not used to speaking English in front of others. Or, most of them did not use English as a means of communication when they were in high school, which could harm the result of the whole group. Therefore, they could not develop their skills and the other members of the group felt annoyed and displeased with these students.

The percentage of the student's preference for group types was summarized in Figure 2.

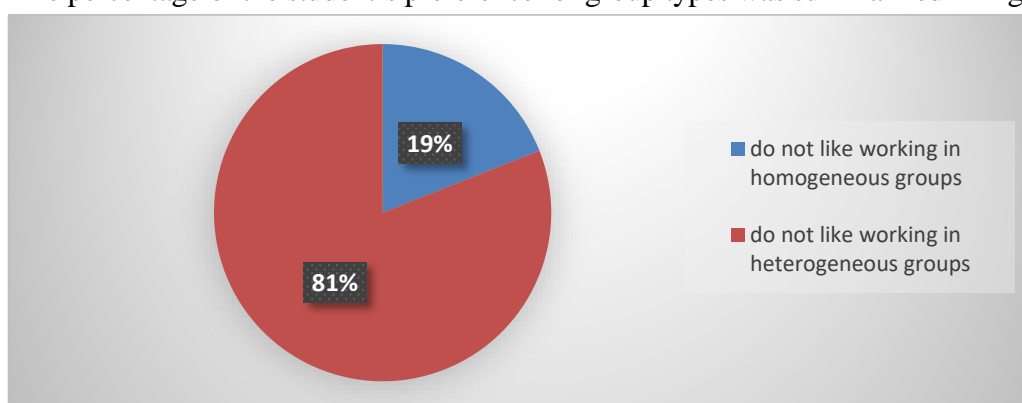


Figure 2. The students' preference for group types

Below is the graph describing students' difficulties when working in heterogeneous groups (Figure 3).

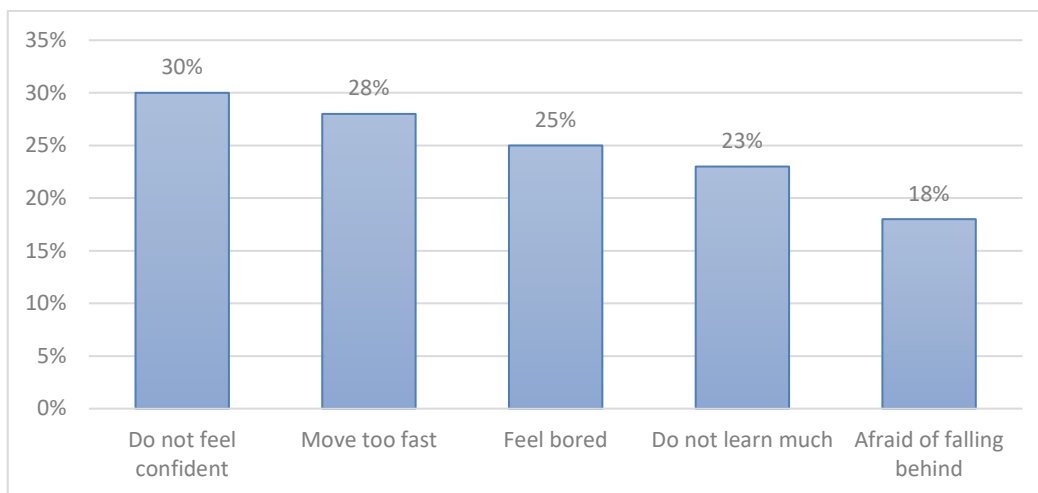


Figure 3. Students' difficulties when working in a heterogeneous group

Concerning problems of group type, 81% of the students did not feel encouraged by working in heterogeneous groups. Of these, 30% affirmed that when working in a heterogeneous group, they felt unconfident and did not dare to express their ideas with others. They were afraid of wrong grammar and wrong pronunciation. A total of 28% of the students said that some students moved too fast without knowing whether every person in that group understood what had been done. On the contrary, 25% of the students felt bored with their partners because their partners were not good at English and worked slowly. Therefore, they had to try as much work as possible because they were afraid that the result would not be good when their partners took charge of the tasks. Twenty-three percent of the students did not learn much when working in this type of group because weak students did not understand what their partners said, or good students already knew what their partners mentioned. Eighteen percent of students reported that when one could not learn as quickly as others and the group tried to slow down to explain things to this member the whole group might end up falling behind.

The graph below illustrates student's difficulties when working in homogeneous groups (Figure 4).

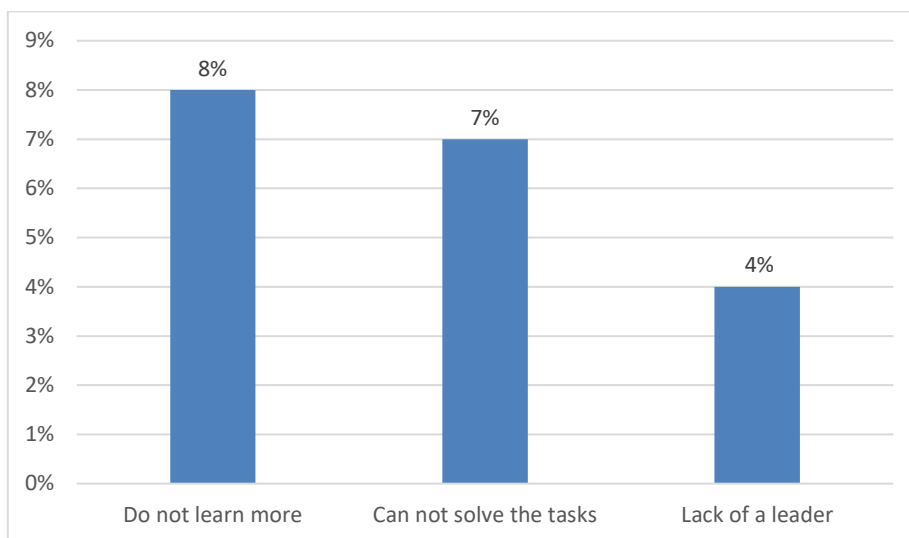


Figure 4. Students’ difficulties when working in a homogeneous group

As shown in Figure 3, only 19% of the students did not like working in homogeneous groups. Of which 8% reported that they did not learn more in this type of group because this way of working is less beneficial for students. It does not stimulate students with lower learning rates to try harder. It can limit diversity and hinder the exchange of different perspectives and ideas. This lack of diversity can result in narrow-mindedness and resistance to change, as individuals may be less exposed to alternative viewpoints and experiences. 7% stated that they had difficulty in solving complex tasks which often require good students. The smallest percentage (4%) was concerned about the knowledge of the task. They were at similar levels; therefore, no one in the group could provide much knowledge about the task. In other words, without a more capable student to guide them along, a group of below-grade students could become overwhelmed, maybe even disruptive, and not make much progress as a result.

Below is the graph describing the preference of the students towards group size.

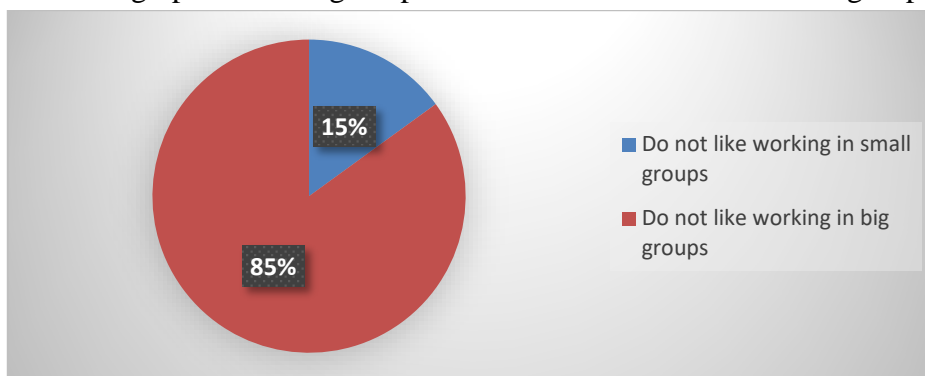


Figure 5. Students’ preference toward group size

When asked about the number of students per group, the vast majority of students (85%) said that four is the ideal number. Only 15% of the students did not like working in

small groups. These results are in line with Davis (1993). In a group composed of four students, one can find differences that will trigger and encourage a type of progress based on interaction.

4. Conclusions and suggestions

The paper reviews some of the literature on group work and enhances the understanding of students' attitudes and challenges in group work. The data revealed that group work is a common strategy of collaborative learning. It was implemented in all the classrooms surveyed. Most participants had a positive attitude towards using group work activities in English lessons and they claimed that this method of learning was an effective way to improve their speaking skills. For a group to function, it is necessary to respect the so-called face-to-face interaction principle. All members of the group must have the possibility to look at each other. Therefore, a small group of four may be the best choice because most of the students reported that in big groups of more than four people, they do not have a lot of chances to practice English. They had to wait for their partners' opinions. The results also noted that students had some difficulties in working in groups. These problems lead to ineffective English learning. By highlighting the challenges, the researcher contributed to a deeper understanding of the issues that occurred during group work activities.

To facilitate learning and instructional diversity in face-to-face classes, the study proposes some suggestions to enhance group learning and communication.

- Teachers should explain the purpose and advantages of group work, emphasizing how group work will help them achieve the course learning outcomes.
- Teachers should choose an appropriate group learning task. It should be relevant to the course objectives and be complex for the students' abilities. Moreover, the criteria of the tasks should also be mentioned clearly so that students know exactly their goals and achieve them more quickly and easily.
- Teachers should consider when choosing group size. The group size depends on the level of the difficulty of the task. If the task is simple, pair work is preferable. If the task is difficult or complex, four students may be suitable because this is large enough for various roles to be assumed, and it provides diverse perspectives on a topic.
- Teachers ask students to produce as many ideas as possible without evaluating them. All ideas are carefully listened to but not commented on and are usually written on a paper so everyone can see them, and so they don't get forgotten or lost. After a large number of ideas have been generated and listed, the group can categorize and examine them. Then the group should agree to choose from among the ideas.
- If students are shy, encourage them.

- If some group members talk too much, teachers suggest setting time limits and some rules (no one speaks longer than 1 minute; no interrupting; no critical comment on people, only ideas) to give each member a chance to speak.
- If a member of the group is dominating, the group can politely point out that the time is limited.
- Teachers should assign different tasks to dissimilar students. In this way, lazy or, shy, noisy or irresponsible students would be forced to work hard and to participate as much as the other group members. For example, let the lazy learners be the reporter, the noisy ones be the secretary, and the sheepish learners be the leader.
- To avoid the overuse of native language, Brown (2001) suggests “to encourage students to practice using the target language in face-to-face contexts and to make them aware of the importance of some real uses for English in their own lives” (cited by Marlene, 2005, p.5)
- When a group or a group member makes noise, teachers should make students aware that they do not need to shout to be heard and this will help to keep noise at a moderate level.
- When a group identifies all disagreements, teachers ask students to listen to everyone’s views and try to come to an agreement that makes sense to everyone. Even when a group’s decision is not liked by someone, that person will follow through on it with the group.

❖ **Conflict of Interest:** Author have no conflict of interest to declare.

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VẤN ĐỀ TRONG HOẠT ĐỘNG NHÓM CỦA SINH VIÊN CÁC LỚP KHÔNG CHUYÊN TIẾNG ANH

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TÓM TẮT

Nghiên cứu được thực hiện nhằm tìm hiểu thái độ và khó khăn của sinh viên đối với các hoạt động nhóm trong giờ học tiếng Anh. Kết quả cho thấy sinh viên có nhiều quan điểm khác nhau về hoạt động nhóm; tuy nhiên, phần lớn sinh viên thực sự thích thú với hoạt động nhóm và xem nó như là một cách thức hiệu quả để cải thiện các kỹ năng ngôn ngữ, cụ thể: 33% sinh viên thích thú với kiểu làm việc này, 49% rất thích, 9% sinh viên có một chút quan tâm, 7% thể hiện sự quan tâm trung lập và có 2% sinh viên có thái độ tiêu cực. Bên cạnh đó, kết quả nghiên cứu cũng cho thấy sinh viên gặp nhiều vấn đề khi được yêu cầu làm việc theo nhóm, như: sử dụng tiếng Việt quá nhiều, tranh cãi, mất thể diện, bị kiểm soát, ngại ngừng... Từ kết quả nghiên cứu này, tác giả gợi ý một vài giải pháp nhằm thực hiện thành công hơn trong hoạt động nhóm.

Từ khóa: hoạt động nhóm; lớp tiếng Anh không chuyên; vấn đề