GROUP WORK IN VIETNAMESE EFL CLASSROOMS: ENGLISH-MAJORED STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS

Nguyen Thi Minh Hanh*; Bui Le Diem Trang

An Giang University, Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh city

*Email: ntmhanh_20av@student.agu.edu.vn

(Received: 05/01/2023; Revised: 20/03/2023; Accepted: 07/04/2023)

Abstract: Group work has widely been used to improve students' communicative competencies. Nevertheless, few studies have focused on how Vietnamese EFL students perceive group work implementation. This study seeks to fill this gap. A questionnaire (n = 297) and semi-structured interviews (n=10) were used to gather data from English-majored students at a university in the Mekong Delta region of Vietnam. The findings showed that most students in this context considered group work an effective strategy in terms of opportunities to enhance language skills, healthy interdependence, and emotional stability. However, their participation in group work activities was still hindered by some negative aspects including unfair contribution and disorder; the reduction of autonomy, and especially, some constraining factors related to personal preferences for peers, teachers' unclear instructions, difficulty in maintaining group harmony, and concerns of losing face. The findings suggest significant modifications for the successful implementation of group work in Vietnamese EFL classrooms from the students' perspectives.

Keywords: Group work, sociocultural theory, collaborative learning, Vietnamese EFL context, students' perceptions

1. Introduction

Group work is a strategy to achieve the three primary aspects of language: fluency, accuracy, and appropriacy (Richards & Platt, 1992). To enhance students' English communicative competencies, group work along with the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach and task-based language teaching has been widely implemented (Willis & Willis, 2007).

Despite the solid establishment of group work implementation in today's English language teaching (ELT) education, research on group work in Vietnam is scant. In fact, this research is limited to certain areas of group work such as group work implementation, challenges of implementing group work activities, or teachers' perceptions of group activities and how to improve these activities (e.g., Hiromori *et al.*, 2021; Nguyen, 2020; Pham, 2011). Many unexplored questions remain regarding how Vietnamese EFL students in the university setting view group work implementation and what factors constrain their participation in groups. The current study attempts to address the following two questions:

1. How do English-majored students in the EFL tertiary classroom perceive group work?
2. What factors do the students perceive as constraining their participation in groupwork activities?

2. Literature review

2.1 Sociocultural theory of learning in the language classroom

Bruner (1978) said that every theory related to learning and human beings needs to be considered in the social context because people are not in isolation but have a close relationship with their living environment and its complexity. This is in agreement with the sociocultural theory derived from the work of psychologist Vygotsky (1978) who believed that parents, caregivers, peers, and the culture at large are responsible for developing higher-order functions. According to Vygotsky (1978), learning has its basis in interacting with other people, which emphasizes the role of interaction in learning.

The sociocultural theory stresses the role that social interaction plays in psychological development. It suggests that human learning is largely a social process, with our cognitive functions formed based on our interactions with those who are "more skilled". In classroom settings, assistance from an adult or a more knowledgeable peer may be necessary for students. Eventually, their zone of proximal development will expand (Wass & Golding, 2014). First, teachers can determine students' current skill levels. Then, they offer instruction that stretches the limits of each child's capabilities. One way to apply sociocultural theory in the classroom is by creating a collaborative learning environment. This might involve pairing or grouping students with others of higher skill levels, and they learn as a group (Jumaat & Tasir, 2014). This also supports many teaching approaches, such as collaborative learning, which concentrates on collaboration and communication through group-based activities.

2.2 Collaborative learning in EFL classrooms and group work definitions

Collaboration commonly means sharing, working, and cooperating with others to achieve general goals. Furthermore, a group of teaching and learning strategies that promote students' collaboration in small groups (from two to five students) is considered a common definition of collaborative learning (CL) (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1991). The other definition is that collaborative learning refers to learning based on social activities that simulate participants' active involvement in their learning activities (Lee, 2014).

Besides, Lin (2016) proposed "collaborative learning" as an umbrella term for a variety of educational approaches involving a joint intellectual effort by students, or students and teachers together. One of these approaches is the communicative approach in which group work activities are utilized to assign tasks to groups of students The tasks may include reviewing their homework, doing daily assignments, participating in discussions, and completing hands-on activities. To concentrate on the social and cooperative features, mutual assistance and interactions between group members are cornerstones because collaboration also means practicing in a safe environment that is made up of an accepting and diverse group of people who have a common interest or issue, and these people need to make discoveries or find possible solutions to tasks given (Osman *et. al.*, 2010).

Similarly, group activities are considered strategies used in collaborative learning, in which learners are involved as co-learners and include all sorts of learning ranging from collaborative group activities to peer support (Chen, 2018). According to Brown (2001), 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 (Brown, 2001). 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. Group activities are also regarded as one of the learner-centered strategies of collaborative learning, promoting learners' overall abilities (Wang, 2021).

2.3 Research into group work in EFL classrooms

Research studies have reported that the implementation of group work in higher education contexts such as in Australasia (Poort *et al.*, 2022; Sainsbury & Walker, 2009) has been influenced by individual trust, cultural diversity, and group formation. However, research into group work in other Asian countries including Japan and Vietnam reported some different results. In Asian contexts, group work implementation is researched through both teachers' and students' perceptions including China (Chen, 2018), Japan (Hiromori *et al.*, 2021), and Vietnam (Thanh & Gillies, 2010). The 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. Moreover, the studies conducted in Vietnam by Nguyen (2020) also studied teachers' reports related 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.

Previous studies have also concentrated on how group work helps to overcome EFL students' speaking difficulties (Pham & Luu, 2015). This study confirmed the important role group work activities play in enhancing students' speaking skills. It suggested that group work can produce positive and lasting results. Conversely, group work can involve both positive and negative aspects as reported in a study by Alghamdy (2019). Collaboration in groups helped to improve students' English skills such as oral presentation, form new relationships, and build up students' confidence, responsibility, motivation, and friendship. Students also learned to express their own opinions while still respecting others' ideas. However, this study also showed some obstacles related to the difference in students' achievement levels, teachers' supervision, or group communication.

Although group work was a focus of numerous earlier studies and was evaluated in a variety of ways, there is currently a paucity of research in Vietnam that focuses on EFL students' perceptions of group work, including their reports of the variables that limit their ability to work in groups. This study is an attempt to fill this gap.

3. Methodology

3.1 Instructional context and research design

The current study was conducted with students at the Faculty of Foreign Languages, at a university in Mekong Delta, which is one of the major educational and research institutions in the Mekong Delta region of Vietnam. The participants of this study are undergraduate students who learn English as their major, including students of the two specific majors, 397 students (N1) of English Language Education (ELE) and 745 students (N2) of English Language Studies (ELS). Totally, the population of this study is 1142 students (N = N1 + N2).

This study adopted a mixed-methods approach to explore students' perceptions of group work activities. Data were collected utilizing a questionnaire survey and semi-structured interviews.

3.2 Participants

Participants of the study were students of the two EFL undergraduate programs in English Language Education (ELE) and English Language Studies (ELS). Their expected English proficiency vary from level 2 to level 5 of the Vietnamese framework for language proficiency (equivalent to A2 to C1 of the CEFR).

Convenience sampling was used to choose the participants for the questionnaire survey. We used the sample size formula (commonly known as Slovin's formula) developed by Slovin in 1960 (Tejada & Punzalan, 2012) to select 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)

Convenience sampling was also utilized to recruit participants for the semi-structured interviews. We invited 10 students who expressed willingness to join the interviews after completing the questionnaire. Table 1 indicates the profiles of the 10 interview participants and how their names were coded.

Table 1. Participants' profile

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

3.3 Instruments

Survey: A questionnaire survey consisting of the five-point Likert scale (from 1 – Strongly disagree; 2 – Disagree; 3 – Neutral; 4 – Agree; 5 – Strongly agree) was completed on paper in approximately 15 minutes by participants.

This questionnaire was adapted from the one used in a previous study that investigated Vietnamese EFL teachers' and students' perceptions toward cooperative learning (Pham, 2011). We also added some items that suit our context and then, did a pilot study with 30 students and 3 lecturers to validate the two factors – reliability and validity of this questionnaire before giving it to the participants.

The questionnaire finally used in this survey consists of 3 main parts. Part 1 consists of 4 items asking for participants' demographic information. Part 2 with three clusters of items asking for students' perceptions of group work activities in the EFL classroom, including:

- Positive aspects (11 items):

  + Cronbach's alpha (a measure to assess reliability): $\alpha = 0.748$

  + Validity: 99.44%

- Negative aspects (9 items):

  + Cronbach's alpha (a measure to assess reliability): $\alpha = 0.810$

  + Validity: 81.48%

- Constraining factors (4 items):

  + Cronbach's alpha (a measure to assess reliability): $\alpha = 0.797$

  + Validity: 100%

Part 3 has three items of invitation for the semi-structured interview.

This questionnaire was adapted and written in English and then, translated into Vietnamese before giving it to participants.

Interview: Semi-structured interviews with a small sample size (n = 10) were used to collect qualitative data from individuals to triangulate with survey data to provide profound conclusions (Kathryn, 2012).

During the procedure, each interviewee joined in a face-to-face interview with some opening questions, moving from general to specific. These students provided some positive and negative aspects of group work as well as some constraining factors they used to face. They provided answers in Vietnamese for approximately 40 minutes.

The interview questions were adapted based on the interview questions used in a study of Le *et al.*, (2018). Some questions were also added to fully achieve the study's objectives. Finally, there are 17 interview questions in total.

3.4 Data collection and analysis

Firstly, the quantitative data were collected from a questionnaire survey to capture an overall picture of students' perceptions. SPSS version 22 was used to calculate the survey data, and then the calculated data were analyzed and categorized into themes.

Semi-structured interviews were used to gather the qualitative data to elicit some specific information that would complement the quantitative data. The interview data were collected and analyzed in three steps: recording, transcribing, translating, and analyzing through a thematic analysis method (Clarke, 2013). The qualitative data will be presented in some sentences summarized and specified from participants' answers.

We then triangulated the quantitative and qualitative data to determine the thematic categories' relationships. We labeled categories by deliberating and discussing repeatedly.

Finally, we merged the codes with the same meanings or split others with different meanings into sub-codes.

4. Findings

4.1 Positive aspects of group work

Analysis of the survey and interview data reveal some positive aspects of group work from students' perceptions, including chances to enhance language skills, healthy interdependence, and emotional stability.

4.1.1 Opportunities to enhance language skills

Table 2 shows the survey results indicating how group work provides opportunities for students to improve their communication skills.

Table 2. Students' perceptions of opportunities to enhance their language skills (N=297)

Statement	Mean	The percentage of students' responses				
		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Group work can help you improve your communicative competencies.	4.12	0.3%	1.7%	14.8%	52.2%	31.0%
Group work makes you more willing to speak.	3.60	0.7%	6.4%	34.7%	48.8%	9.4%
Group work gives you more comprehensible input.	4.07	0%	1.3%	16.8%	55.6%	26.3%
You can receive peers' feedback and learn from them.	4.42	0%	0.3%	6.4%	44.1%	49.2%

The survey results revealed that most students agreed or strongly agreed with the four statements with a high mean ranging from 3.6 to 4.42. Specifically, more than 80% of the students "strongly agreed" and "agreed" that group work was effective in developing their communicative competencies. In fact, a high mean value of 4.42 for the statement indicates that the students can receive feedback from their peers when working in groups. Noticeably, no one denied the role of peers' feedback in group activities when students could learn from the feedback and improve themselves without the need for too much teacher talk. Along with this, more comprehensible input was revealed by 55.6% of students who worked in groups. What follows then was the remaining 48.8% of the students reported that they were more willing to speak thanks to group work. This result was consistent with the responses from many interview participants (S3, S4) as follows:

> *When speaking, I used to make some mistakes in pronunciation or grammar structure, but my group mates corrected them and gave me some advice to help me. Then, my communication skills are much better than before.* (S3)

> *I admit that working in groups enhances my communication skills. For example, when I and my teammates have different ideas, we have time to discuss them, so I can learn to express my opinions logically to persuade my friends.* (S4)

4.1.2 Healthy interdependence

Table 3. Students' perceptions of how group work can lead to Healthy interdependence (N=297)

Statement	Mean	The percentage of students' responses				
		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
You feel bonded and have a close connection with group members.	4.07	0%	2.0%	20.5%	46.2%	31.3%
You have joint efforts and mutual goals with your partners.	4.12	0.3%	2.0%	12.5%	55.6%	29.6%
You can build up and maintain an interdependent friendship and individual responsibilities.	4.13	0.3%	2.7%	13.5%	50.5%	33.0%

When the participants were asked how group work helped them strengthen their relationships and individual responsibility, it was surprising to discover that most had very positive attitudes (see Table 3). With the mean of three statements ranging from 4.07 to 4.13, students perceived that group work was effectively used to help strengthen their friendship bonds. More than 70% of students agreed or strongly agreed that they had a close connection with other members while more than 80% of students agreed or even strongly agreed that group work provided them with joint efforts and mutual goals that motivate them greatly. Likewise, individual responsibility was also built up with a high percentage of agreement (50.5%). As S1, S2 and S8 stated:

> *I can work with my friends frequently thanks to group work, furthermore, I am an introverted person so group work provides me a chance to get out of my comfort zone and have more close relationships.* (S1)

> *When working in groups, I personally felt energetic because of the support and efforts my partners showed me. For example, I felt delighted when hearing their claps, supportive words, or profound ideas. Moreover, their trust motivated me to be more responsible.* (S2)

> *I was motivated and inspired by my friends, which makes me concentrate easily and responsibly on my study because I want to contribute to our joint work.* (S8)

4.1.3 Emotional stability

The statistics from the survey showed that every statement gained a high percentage of agreement (see Table 4). Very few students (only 5%) denied "a more intimate and low-pressure environment" group work can provide. In fact, students were always afraid of speaking in front of the whole class but there was no pressure to speak with their group members in a small-size group, according to S8. In addition, more than 70% of students receiving "encouragement and appreciation from peers" also reported that their learning motivation and self-efficacy increased a lot.

Table 4. Students' perceptions of how group work can lead to emotional stability (N=297)

Statement	Mean	The percentage of students' responses				
		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Group work gives you a more intimate and low-pressure environment to study English.	3.97	0%	5.1%	20.2%	47.1%	27.6%
Working in a group helps enhance your learning motivation.	4.01	0.3%	4.0%	21.2%	42.8%	31.6%
Group work provides you with encouragement and appreciation from peers.	3.91	0.3%	4.4%	21.9%	50.5%	22.9%
Group work can increase your self-efficacy.	3.83	1.3%	3.7%	23.9%	53.2%	17.8%

Through interviewing, many participants (S4, S7, S8) also reported as follow:

Sometimes, when I receive bad scores, I tend to get angry and disappointed. However, when I see my friends consider bad marks as a precious experience that helps them grow up and realize their weaknesses, I become more optimistic and motivated. (S4)

When I discuss with my friends, we work very proactively, it's fascinating that every member is studying and I'm not an exception, so I have a reason to try, which motivates me a lot. (S7 and S8)

When I received others' help I realized that I was cared for by many people, so I was really happy. (S8)

4.2 Negative aspects of group work

While concentrating on the negative aspects, we have to admit that besides many positive aspects above, there are still some negative aspects consisting of unfair contribution and disorder, and the reduction of autonomy.

4.2.1 Unfair contribution and disorder

Table 5. Students' perceptions of unfair contribution and disorder (N = 297)

Statement	Mean	The percentage of students' responses				
		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
You think there are always unfair contributions because some students are not willing to work.	2.97	7.7%	34.0%	18.2%	34.0%	6.1%
The noise level is unacceptable because some members of my groups talk too much but sometimes digress from the lesson.	2.71	11.4%	35.7%	29.6%	16.8%	6.4%
The results of your groups are always low-quality and affect your outcomes.	2.22	22.6%	45.1%	22.2%	7.7%	2.4%

As shown in Table 5, the unfair contribution is a vital thing that nearly 40.1% of students had to tackle. Likewise, according to the interview data, high-contributing members could 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 (S8, S9). S8 also complained:

> *I have assigned work for each member but not all of them were willing to work. Some had to work very hard and submitted their work on time but some did not contribute anything.* (S8)

Based on the participants' responses (S1, S8, and S9), the students who did not do or unwillingly did the assigned tasks 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 less chance to communicate with their partners (S9). In addition, the unacceptable noise level is also another negative aspect of group work with 23.2% of the students choosing "Agree" and "Strongly agree". This is also consistent with the interview results, some participants (S1 and S8) said:

> *Frequently, some members did not pay attention to our work, they tend to use smartphones or chat, they make noise and distract other high-productive members.* (S1)

4.2.2 The reduction of autonomy

Table 6. Students' perceptions of the reduction of autonomy (N=297)

Statement	Mean	The percentage of students' responses				
		Strongly Disagree	**Disagree**	**Neutral**	**Agree**	**Strongly Agree**
You feel that group work decreases your autonomy and self-reliance in English learning.	2.34	16.2%	49.2%	21.9%	10.4%	2.4%
You sometimes over-depend on others' decisions.	2.67	14.1%	29.6%	34.3%	19.2%	2.7%

Group work can reduce students' autonomy. According to Table 6, 10.4% percent of the students said that group work decreased their autonomy and self-reliance while 19.2% of students admitted that they are over-dependent on others' decisions when working in groups. This is also consistent with the interview results, some participants (S6 and S9) said:

> *I used to experience that everyone did not do anything but wait for me. I have to do everything while others depended steadily on my work.* (S6)

The reduction of autonomy can also be caused by other factors like over-control of leaders, as S9 reported:

> *I used to work with a leader who dominated too much, she wanted to control but there was no dedication or connection between us. I did not have any opportunity to express my ideas. The leader was hardheaded, she neglected any peer correction, then, as a result, we receive a low score.* (S9)

4.3 Factors constraining group work

Analysis of the survey and interview data reveals three major factors that constrain group work, including personal preferences for peers, teachers' unclear instructions, and other restricting factors related to harmonious maintenance. Table 7 shows the survey results.

Table 7. Students' perceptions of constraining factors influencing the EFL students' performance in group activities (N=297)

Statement	Mean	The percentage of students' responses				
		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
You have difficulties when choosing your group members.	3.12	15.8%	16.8%	20.2%	33.7%	13.5%
You find it hard to work in groups because teachers usually give unclear instructions for group work.	3.09	14.1%	11.1%	27.9%	45.5%	1.3%
You are afraid of not being able to contribute good ideas to the group when sharing information in group activities.	3.02	7.1%	27.3%	29.3%	29.0%	7.4%
Concerns of "losing face" hold you back when you want to share your ideas in groups.	3.01	10.8%	20.9%	29.3%	34.3%	4.7%

4.3.1 Personal preferences for peers, and teachers' unclear instructions

According to the survey results, 33.7 % of students agreed that they encountered some difficulties in choosing their group members. Then, the interview results revealed that the difficulties come from their personal preferences for peers in group work. As S6 said:

> *When working in groups, I prefer working with my friends, but it is hard for me to ensure that we can choose the same course and convince them to work with me*. (S6)

Otherwise, students who did not work with their friends still desired to work with the ones they had known before because it was easy to discuss with them, as S1 admitted. S7 also supported:

> *I liked working with the ones I knew before. I want to know something related to their background information, for example, their abilities, strength, and also interest.* (S7)

This difficulty is also caused by the limited number of group members. Teachers usually assign a certain size for every group like groups of five or groups of four. However, S2 revealed it was also common that "the number of friends who wanted to work together did not match the group size assignment". S5 also complained:

> *It was hard and, sometimes, painful to decide who must leave*. (S5)

Another factor revealed by students is teachers' unclear instruction. The unclear instructions given by teachers can also constrain students to work in group activities. This is

proved by the high percentage of responses (45.5%). Students agreed that unclear instructions from teachers could confuse them a lot. As S6 and S1 answered:

> *I sometimes have problems with the instructions that my group receives. It is too complicated and confuses my groups a lot.* (S6)

> *Teachers may think that we are familiar with working in groups, so they do not spend explaining what they want us to do. As a result, we can misunderstand our teachers' requirements.* (S1)

4.3.2 Factors related to concerns of losing face and maintaining group harmony

The effectiveness of group work can be constrained by factors related to concerns of losing face, as perceived by the students in the study. As shown in Table 7 above, being afraid of "losing face" was perceived as a constraint that holds students back whenever working with others. Nearly 34.3% of students agreed and 4.7% of them strongly agree that they were afraid of "losing face". Besides, 29% of the students agreed and 7.4% of students strongly agreed that they were afraid of not being able to contribute good ideas to the group when sharing information in group activities. According to many interviewees, they were not very confident or willing to express their ideas if they could not ensure the accuracy or effectiveness of their ideas. As S3 and S9 said:

> *I am afraid that my ideas are not good enough. Especially I am scared about being rejected or disagreed with by my friends so sometimes I decide to keep silent while I still think that my ideas are much better than others.* (S3)

> *I am usually afraid of making mistakes or losing face. I realize that I'm not a very good student in my groups so whenever I have any ideas, I'm scared to speak out.* (S9)

The interview results also showed that students also hesitate to criticize, comment, or reject their group members' ideas. Some of them are not confident to contribute their thoughts like S8, S9, and S10. They said:

> *There is a contrary that I honestly do not approve of my friends' ideas but I am not "brave" enough to speak out about what I want*. (S8)

> *I will indirectly express my ideas, for example, I will say: "I think maybe we should…" or "if you want, you can add my ideas" instead of directly sharing like "We have to do like this" or "It's important to …".* (S9 and S10)

Otherwise, some participants did not want to directly reject their group members' ideas because they wanted to maintain their group's harmonious atmosphere. S2 also reported:

> *We normally face unfair contributions especially when we work with our friends. We are afraid of complaining because we are friends and foremost, we want to maintain our group harmony.* (S2)

5. Discussion

The findings indicated that group work can provide students with many positive aspects. This is consistent with many previous studies, for example, Brown (2001), mentioned that group

work can obtain various advantages. According to students' responses, group work, firstly, offers opportunities for students to enhance their language skills, especially their communicative competencies. Particularly, the positive aspects such as the increase in students' willingness to speak, more comprehensible input information, and peer feedback play an important role in the improvement of communicative competencies. This aligned with those found in the study of Pham (2011) which stated collaboration in a group encourages learners to improve their skills such as collaborative and communication skills. The second positive aspect of group work reflected by students is healthy interdependence. During the group procedure, students have opportunities to interact and strengthen their relationships. The positive interdependence is also obviously presented by their mutual goals and the joint efforts they make. This means a group of students working together repeatedly on the same task can generate a positive relationship in which each student had his/her tasks to undertake but still supported each other. Compared to whole-class activity, group work makes students more responsible for their tasks and the task progress (Kasim, 2015). Finally, students reflected that emotional stability is also fostered by working in groups. Furthermore, Kasim and Usman (2015) proved that, unlike whole-class activities, group-based activities can probably minimize unpleasant situations, but maximize satisfaction, which is the step toward individualizing instruction. In this current study, the students perceived that they enjoyed the intimate and low-pressure environment in groups while peers' appreciation and the joint efforts mentioned above increase their motivation and self-efficacy. Working together with their peers encourages them to learn.

On the other hand, in terms of students' perceptions of group work, the findings reveal some negative aspects of group work as well. First of all, they mentioned unfair contributions and disorder. Many students who are high-productive group members feel overloaded and upset about the unfair contribution between them and others while other non- or low-contributing members cannot catch up with their progress. These members can ignore others' work or be ignored by others. According to Mueller and Fleming (2001), members who do not contribute to the task have free time to chat, make noise, and sometimes digress from the lesson. In fact, teachers and students usually encounter obstacles when they try to organize and control the collaborative process in group-based activities (Gillies & Boyle, 2010), including keeping track of each group member's work, managing time, supplying necessary documents, allocating duties, and reinforcing individual beliefs and behaviors. This can lead to another negative aspect reflected by students – the reduction of autonomy. This means that autonomy and self-reliance can be declined when students always depend on or wait for others' decisions. These students may lack collaborative skills or are not confident enough to decide their work or express their ideas in groups. Although healthy interdependence can be formed thanks to group work, as mentioned above, some low-productive or non-contribution students can take advantage of the collective environment to mainly rely on others' efforts. Agreeing with this finding, Johnson (1999) revealed that some students work less while others are responsible for too many tasks in the same group (Johnson & Johnson, 1999).

The findings indicated some common constraining factors that can limit the effectiveness of group work. The first two factors are personal preferences for peers and teachers' unclear instructions. According to their responses, it is hard for them to convince their friends who can work with them in a group. Then, the number of friends who can work in one group may not match the group size that teachers assign. In fact, students' desire to work with their friends is not

a negative aspect because they not only collaborate but also support others in their groups as much as they could (Wang, 2021). However, personal preferences for peers can constrain them to form their groups. Furthermore, teachers' unclear instructions are also noticeable. Teachers cannot provide students with basic information before asking them to work in groups also makes students confused and anxious (Blatchford *et al.*, 2003). Much research showed that many cognitive issues are involved when applying a western language teaching technique like group work to Asian classrooms because some Asian students tend to work individually with clear instructions rather than work freely and collaboratively with others (Nguyen *et al.*, 2006). Therefore, students, especially in Vietnamese EFL classrooms, can not work in groups effectively with unclear instructions. Besides, students are afraid of losing face, which can hold students back when they are inclined to express their thoughts. Sharing a similar aspect related to personal "face" in a social context is being afraid of not contributing good ideas when sharing information in group activities. This means that students may not contribute to the mutual work because they are worried or uncertain about their ability, their ideas, or their decisions. This also explains why some students tend to rely on other members in groups, as mentioned before. Students also try to maintain harmony in their groups, this can restrict students from directly and fairly criticizing, commenting, or rejecting others' ideas. Both factors limit group work's effectiveness when students, even concerning losing face or harmonious maintenance, can not express what they truly think. This is also a normal behavior in a social context, especially in the Asian context. For instance, the habit of "thinking thrice before acting" is popular among students (Wang, 2012) while they are also less likely to debate but try to negotiate or even compromise in communication as a way to protect harmony in groups and others' social faces.

The present study has some limitations. This is the small number of participants joining the semi-structured interview (ten participants), this can limit the source of information gained from the interview stage. In addition, we can only concentrate on students' perceptions, while in group activities, teachers' roles are also vital. This suggests the necessity of further studies focussing on both teachers' and students' perceptions of group work with a large number of participants. After all, the findings of this study call for the attention of teachers and educators to reconsider these mentioned constraining factors and negative aspects, and at the same time, reinforce and step forwards these positive aspects. This suggests greater care for the effective application of group work in EFL classrooms, teachers will be eligible to modify their teaching by maximizing the positive aspects students reported and minimizing the challenges they faced.

6. Conclusion

The increasing popularity of communicative language teaching (CLT) in EFL classes and the dearth of current research in group work necessitated this study. The findings reported that the majority of students recognized many positive aspects of group work (including opportunities to enhance language skills, healthy interdependence, and emotional stability). On the other hand, they still admitted some negative aspects (including unfair contribution and disorder; and the reduction of autonomy). Finally, some constraining factors related to personal preferences for peers, teachers' unclear instructions, maintaining group harmony, and concerns about losing face were identified in the study. The findings practically suggest significant ramifications for a more efficient application of group work activities in EFL lessons. Particularly, the pedagogical implications are crucial for educators and teacher trainers to reconsider the effectiveness of group

activities in their classes, as well as how these activities are reflected by their students. To effectively implement group work activities in EFL classrooms, teachers should be aware of the importance of group work and reconsider both its implementation and students' perceptions in their own teaching context. Furthermore, through self-evaluation, greater care should be taken to tackle the perceived constraining factors, with more attention paid to the improvement of the communicative skills among Vietnamese English language learners by using group work.

References

Alghamdy, R. (2019). EFL learners' reflections on cooperative learning: Issues of Implementation. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies, 9(3),* 271–277.

Blatchford, P., Kutnick, P., Baines, E., & Galton, M. (2003). Toward a social pedagogy of classroom group work. *International Journal of Educational Research, 39*, 153–172

Brown H.D. (2001). *Teaching by principle. An interactive approach to language pedagogy* (2nd edition). Longman.

Bruner, J.S. (1978). The role of dialogue in language acquisition. In A. Sinclair, R.J. Jarvelle, & W.J.M. Levelt (Eds.), *The child's concept of language* (pp. 241-256). New York: Springer-Verlag.

Chen, Y. (2018). Perceptions of EFL College Students towards Collaborative Learning. *English Language Teaching*, *11*(2), 1–4.

Clarke, V. (2017). Thematic analysis. T*he Journal of Positive Psychology.*

Gillies, R., & Boyle, M. (2010). Teachers' reflections on cooperative learning: Issues of implementation. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 26*, 933–940

Hiromori, T., Yoshimura, M., Kirimura, R., & Mitsugi, M. (2021). Roles of leadership and L2 learner motivation in group work activities. *JACET Journal, 65*, 47–67.

Johnson, D.W., & Johnson, R.T. (1999). Making cooperative learning work. *Theory into Practice*, *38*, 67–73.

Johnson, D.W., Johnson, R.T., & Smith, K.A. (1991). Cooperative Learning: Increasing College Faculty Instructional Productivity. *ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report,* No. 4. Washington, D.C.: School of Education and Human Development, George Washington University.

Jumaat, N., & Tasir, Z. (2014) Instructional scaffolding in online learning environment: A meta-analysis. *International Conference on Teaching and Learning in Computing and Engineering*.

Kasim, U. (2015). *Implementation of Group Work in the Classroom*. Lingua, *12*(1), 97–106.

Le, H., Janssen, J., & Wubbels, T. (2018). Collaborative learning practices: teacher and student perceived obstacles to effective student collaboration. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, *48*(1), 103–122.

Lee, J. (2014). *Using Group-Work to Optimize Learning Opportunities for Grade 1 and 2 English Language Learners in the Classroom*. Degree of Master of Teaching. University of Toronto.

Lin, L. (2015). *Investigating Chinese HE EFL Classrooms: Using Collaborative Learning to Enhance Learning*.

Muller, A., & Fleming, T. (2001) *Cooperative Learning: Listening to How Children Work at School. Journal of Educational Research*, *94*(5). Penssylvania: Penssylvania State University.

Nguyen, T.B.T. (2020). Transforming and improving the knowledge and roles of teachers in collaborative learning practice in English teaching at a Vietnamese university", (in Vietnamese), *Vietnam. Journal of Educational Sciences, 36,* 6–12.

Nguyen, P.M., Terlouw, C., & Pilot, A. (2006). Culturally appropriate pedagogy: The case of group learning in a Confucian Heritage Culture context. *Intercultural Education, 17*(1), 1–19.

Osman, N., Nayan, S., Mansor, M., Maesin, A., & Shafie, L. (2010*).* Spoken Skills, Communication Apprehension, and Collaborative Learning. *Cross-Cultural Communication, 6*(2), 117–124.

Pham, D.T.A., & Luu, Q.K. (2015) Applying group work activities to improve English speaking skills for nursing students at Danang university of medical technology and pharmacy. *The University of Danang, journal of science and technology*, *12*(97), 94–99.

Pham, T.H.T. (2011) An Investigation of Perceptions of Vietnamese Teachers and Students towards Cooperative Learning (CL*). International Education Studies*, *4*(1), 3–12.

Poort, I., Jansen, E., & Hofman, A. (2022). Does the group matter? Effects of trust, cultural diversity, and group formation on engagement in group work in higher education. *Higher Education Research & Development (HERDSA)*, *41*(2), 511–526.

Richards, J.C., Platt, J., & Platt, H. (1992). *Dictionary of language teaching and applied linguistics*. London: Longman.

Sainsbury, E., & Walker, R. (2009). Motivation, learning and group work – the effect of friendship on collaboration. In *Proceedings of The Australian Conference on Science and Mathematics Education*.

Su, Y., Li, Y., Hu, H., & Rosé, C.P. (2018). Exploring college English language learners' self and social regulation of learning during wiki-supported collaborative reading activities. *International Journal of Computer-Supported Collaborative Learning*, *13*(1), 35–60.

Tejada, J.J., & Punzalan, J.R.B. (2012). On the misuse of Slovin's formula. *The philippine statistician*, *61*(1), 129–136.

Thanh, P.T.H., & Gillies, R. (2010). Group Composition of Cooperative Learning: Does Heterogeneous Grouping Work in Asian Classrooms? *International Education Studies*, *3*(3), 12–19.

Vygotsky, L. (1978). Vygots Interaction between learning and development. *Readings on the development of children*, *23*(3), 34–41.

Wang, J. (2021) Friendship Group Activities: Voices from Chinese EFL Learners. *Canadian Center of Science and Education (CCSE)*, *14*(1), 140–151.

Wang, Y. (2012). Mainland Chinese students' group work adaptation in a UK business school. *Teaching in Higher Education*, *17*(5), 523–535.

Wass, R., & Golding, C. (2014) Sharpening a tool for teaching: the zone of proximal development. *Teaching in Higher Education*, *19*(6), 671–684.

Willis, D., & Willis, J. (2007). *Doing task-based teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

HOẠT ĐỘNG NHÓM TRONG CÁC LỚP TIẾNG ANH TẠI VIỆT NAM: QUAN ĐIỂM CỦA SINH VIÊN NGÀNH TIẾNG ANH

Tóm tắt: Cùng với sự phổ biến và hiệu quả của hoạt động nhóm, nghiên cứu này nhằm khai thác góc nhìn của người học về hoạt động nhóm. Bảng câu hỏi (n=297) và phỏng vấn bán cấu trúc (n=10) được sử dụng để thu thập dữ liệu từ các sinh viên chuyên Anh tại một trường đại học ở Việt Nam. Kết quả cho thấy nhiều khía cạnh tích cực gồm cơ hội nâng cao kỹ năng ngôn ngữ, sự kết nối lành mạnh và ổn định cảm xúc. Tuy nhiên, vẫn còn một số mặt tiêu cực như thiếu công bằng trong đóng góp, mất trật tự và giảm tính tự chủ; đặc biệt là các yếu tố hạn chế như sự ưu ái cá nhân đối với bạn bè, hướng dẫn thiếu rõ ràng của giảng viên, duy trì sự hài hòa trong nhóm, và việc ngại mất thể diện. Kết quả trên tạo tiền đề cho việc nâng cao chất lượng của hoạt động nhóm trong các lớp Tiếng Anh tại Việt Nam.

Từ khóa: Hoạt động nhóm, thuyết văn hóa xã hội, học tập cộng tác, bối cảnh ngoại ngữ, góc nhìn của sinh viên