

Assessing the Implementation of Group Work in EFL Classrooms: Secondary Schools in Focus

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Abstract

This study investigated implementation of group work in EFL classrooms. It specifically addressed the successes and the challenges the teachers face in using group work at secondary schools. Thirty-one teachers from six secondary schools and two students from one secondary school participated in the study. Three data collection instruments, namely questionnaire, interview and classroom observation, were used. The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. The findings revealed that the teachers reckoned the considerable role group work could play in helping students learn English well, but the teachers noted some difficulties they faced when they attempted to use group work. These were students' poor language ability, low group participation, large class size, difficult textbook tasks and activities and teachers' time shortage. To minimize such problems, the teachers suggest careful planning and contextualizing of group work activities as the possible strategies. The teachers seem to require not only training on strategies of using group work effectively in classrooms but also follow up and coaching of employing group work in their day to day classroom instructions.

Keywords: group work, classroom instruction, classroom interaction, group work implementation

Background of the study

Group work in the context of education in general and in second/foreign language teaching in particular refers to an instructional technique that divides students into small groups to involve in a face-to-face discussion, with little monitoring by the teacher, for achieving the intended learning outcomes (Bowering, Leggett, Harvey & Hui, 2007). In a broader perspective, group work is also considered as cooperative learning with five grouping modalities (McGroarty, 1989): peer tutoring, jigsaw, cooperative projects, cooperative/individualized method, and cooperative

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interaction. Each of such group activities focuses on accomplishing a particular task with a shared participation of individual group members. In the context of this study, group work refers to teachers' arrangement of students into various teams to work together on tasks in their day-to-day English lessons.

Teachers are usually advised to use group work in their classroom instructions mainly for pedagogical and psycholinguistic reasons (Long & Porter, 1985; Swain, 2000; Naughton, 2006). Pedagogically, the teachers could share their instructional responsibilities with students when they get students into groups for performing classroom tasks and activities. From a psycholinguistic perspective, exposing learners to the target language by the help of group work facilitates their mastery of the language. McGroarty (1989) noted that students will have more opportunities of using the language and negotiation of meaning when they get into group work activities. In addition to developing the social skills of students, group work further creates space for students to utilize their acquired knowledge of language (Gass & Mackey, 2015).

According to Axi-min and Jian-qiang (2016), using group work as instructional technique draws ideas on various theories like cognitivism, group dynamics, education and constructivism. Implementation of group work is, thus, assumed to help not only students to develop their academic and communication skills but also teachers to minimize their teaching load and instructional responsibilities. Moreover, several studies (e.g., Sugino, 1994; Pyun, 2004) showed that students' social interaction, linguistic complexity, and communication confidence could improve over time with effective utilization of group work in EFL/ESL classrooms.

Employing group work in English language teaching programs has become a common practice and works of advocacy have been made to implement it on a regular basis. However, some teachers are concerned with finding effective strategies and techniques they can use for implementing group work in classroom teaching. Little has been known and suggested about how to implement group work in EFL classroom teaching effectively. Even studies in group work seem to be more concerned not about strategies or skills of using group work in classroom instructions, but about instructional effects of group work on learners' progress in the target language development and social integrity (e.g.,

Long & Porter, 1985). Thus, if there is a need for using group work in English language teaching effectively, teachers' strategies and skills for managing group work in their classrooms should deserve much more attention.

A research project 'Improving pupil group work in classrooms' (2005) in the United Kingdom (UK) pointed out that teachers' limited awareness and skills of setting up purposes and strategies for forming groups in classroom teaching hampered the group work effectiveness in schools. The project specifically described the ineffective implementation of group work in the UK schools:

Pupils may sit in groups, but they rarely interact and work as groups. Groups in classrooms are often formed without a strategic view of their purpose. Even though some tasks may be assigned to groups of pupils, there is little support for pupil-pupil interactions within groups to make learning effective. (www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk)

On the other hand, despite the limited efforts of teachers to get students to perform the intended tasks and activities in groups, there are no signs of commitment in the students to involve in the group discussion or task accomplishment. There appears to be little share of benefits from using group work in classroom instructions.

This concern of effectiveness in group work implementation becomes more serious in Ethiopian schools where there are perceptual problems like misconceptions of group work roles and contextual factors such as large classrooms, limited resources and poor pedagogical competence of teachers. Of course, Tolessa, Sorale and Sultan (2017) assessed students' perception on group work and group assignments in classroom teaching at Bula Hora University in Ethiopia and noted that most students misunderstood their role as a group member and disengaged themselves from the group work tasks. Our personal observation also indicates that there is a considerable gap between what teachers claim to use and what they actually do in implementing group work in their day-to-day instructions. That is, a similar fashion of group work implementation, stated above, is also common in our context: students are usually asked to get into groups and discuss on what is given in the textbook; despite the teachers' intention, the students do not fully engage in the task. Therefore, there seems to be a real gap between the teachers' existing use

of group work in EFL classrooms and the proposed scale of application the group work demands for promising return.

Objectives of the Study

This study mainly intended to:

1. Explore secondary school EFL teachers' perceived and actual practices of group work in their classroom instructions
2. Identify problems EFL teachers face in using group work in their classrooms

Research Method

Participants

This study involved first cycle secondary school (Grade 9 and Grade 10) EFL teachers around Bahir Dar town. The main reasons for focusing on these schools were: first the researchers believed that though using group work in the first cycle secondary schools would not be new to teachers and students, insignificant attention seemed to be given to effective group work implementation. Even though proper practices may not be observed, the currently used textbooks at this cycle required students and teachers to do classroom activities in groups. Second, students have to develop experience of group work participation at the first cycle secondary school if there is a need to make use of group work activities in further schooling. Last, but not least, at this school level the teachers were believed to have more awareness and practical experience of using group work in their instructions. Thus, the study considered six (three urban and three rural) first cycle secondary schools and 31 EFL teachers who were willing to take part in the study, and two students from Fasilo General Secondary School based on the researchers' convenience and accessibility.

Instruments

Quantitative and qualitative data collection instruments were used. The study employed a questionnaire for assessing and examining the implementation of group work. Besides, in order to investigate the issue deeply, semi-structured interviews and classroom observations were used as major data collection instruments. Following a brief explanation on each of the data collection instrument is given.

This study employed both open and closed ended questionnaire items for collecting data on the teachers' implementation of group work in their EFL classroom instructions. The items were designed based on literature on theoretical aspects of group work in second language curriculum (Chappell, 2014; Nation, 1994). The 15 closed items and two open ended items were primarily focus on two major areas: the commonly used strategies or techniques of teachers in group work activities and the common challenges teachers face in employing group work in EFL classroom instructions. A few items were modified for clarity and content after comments given from two colleagues (EFL instructors).

The current study also used semi-structured interview for crosschecking the teachers' responses to questionnaire items. Two major questions that could guide the interview sessions were outlined. The first question was related to how teachers could employ group work effectively in their EFL classroom instructions. The other was on the practical problems teachers face during EFL classroom instructions. The interview sessions took a total of an hour and thirty minutes for both interviewees in order to collect the required data. Similarly, more than thirty minutes interview sessions were conducted with two students (15 minutes for each one).

Moreover, this study employed classroom observation for collecting data on the teachers' practices of group work. The observation was primarily focusing on the teachers' behaviors in their attempts to use group work in the actual EFL classroom instructions. Though the classroom observation emphasized on what the teachers actually did in their classroom instructions on different lesson activities and on how they organized students during group work, some relevant instructional events were caught using observation notes and video recording. Six classroom observations (three for each of the teachers interviewed) were considered for the data analysis.

Procedures

A series of steps were followed to collect and analyze data. First, questionnaire was administered to thirty-one English teachers selected from the six secondary schools. Then, the questionnaire-based data were organized and frequency count of teachers' responses was computed in addition to thematic analysis of the open-ended part of the questionnaire. Second, an extended interview was made with two teachers from one of the schools. The interview data were organized and analyzed based on

thematic analysis. Last but not least, classroom observation of the two teachers was done for three consecutive weeks with observation notes and video recordings. The observation data were organized and analyzed thematically. Thus, after a detailed analysis and compilation of the collected data through the instruments (questionnaire, interviews and classroom observation), sensible conclusions were drawn based on the findings.

Results

In this section results of the data analysis are presented and discussed. First, the results obtained from the questionnaire are presented, followed by analysis of the data from the classroom observations and interviews with the teachers and students. Then, these results are discussed.

With regard to the importance of using group work in an EFL classroom context in schools, teachers have expressed that group work can play a significant role mainly in two ways. On the one hand, the group work tasks, provided they are implemented efficiently, can help students exchange ideas about the topics they discuss in the classroom. On the other hand, teachers highlighted that the students can reinforce their English language oral skills through the group work tasks that are put into force.

It appears from the data gathered that the teachers have some doubts about the pragmatic stance of group work in EFL contexts. For instance, one of the teachers used "If the students implemented group work properly, it would be good," and another teacher's concern was also seemingly the practicality issue. She mentioned, "If it is practical, it is very important." Others also shared similar concerns; they underlined that the effective implementation of group work could be a demanding business.

With the exception of two teachers who said they used group work once in two lessons and once in three or four lessons respectively, the rest of the teachers (29) said that they used group work in every lesson. It is actually not surprising if the teachers put group work into effect as their job demands improving the students' communication skills in almost all aspects. What is surprising is that all teachers (n= 31) unanimously agreed that they faced problems of one kind or another when they implemented group work in their English classes. They all answered 'yes'

to the item asking if they had experienced problems as they tried to implement group work as a classroom learning/teaching tool.

The respondent teachers were asked to choose from as well as mention a number of problems they encountered during the group work implementation phase. Accordingly, they chose from the given alternatives and added some others.

Table 1: Group work Implementation Problems

Problems	Number (n)
a. Grouping students is time taking.	11
b. Students do not actively participate in the given tasks.	20
c. The physical condition of the classroom is not conducive.	12
d. Students use their mother tongue in discussing issues.	18
e. The teaching material and tasks in it are not appropriate for group work tasks.	4
f. The instructional time is not sufficient.	12
g. Managing group work is too difficult for me due to my own lack of skills and language proficiency problems.	4
h. Others [Mention].	

As can be seen from the above data, the problems that teachers experienced when they implemented group work in their English classes included various issues. The two top rated problems teachers encountered were reluctance to participate among students (n= 20) and use of mother tongue during the group discussion (n= 18). Others such as the physical environment of the classroom, shortage of class hours and the time taking nature of group work were also mentioned as significant contributors for the ineffective implementation of group work in secondary school English classes. The least rated others, inappropriateness of the teaching material tasks (n= 4) and teachers' own lack of skills and proficiency to organize group work (n= 4) could possibly be seen as potential threats for group work in EFL classes, at least in the context of the research zone.

Participants also added other factors that they considered threats or problems when attempting to implement group work. The wide range coverage of the text book is perhaps a serious problem they emphasized. The textbook was attributed to have been bulky so that teachers could find it hard to implement group work, which they thought could take much time. In connection with this, the time given to finish the specific skills is so much limited that it did not enable them to get tasks done within the time budgeted as one of the respondents wrote "How can we manage 7 or 8 groups [within 40 minutes' time] in a class?" Although the teachers said so, it can be questioned whether the big volume of the textbook could impede the implementation of group work in an EFL context. Nevertheless, this perception of teachers could be seen as a potential area of observation for further understanding of the issue.

A participant also wrote that he witnessed some peers in groups diverting others' attention to some other issues. Of course, this could partly occur due to the teacher's failure to properly manage the groups and set engaging and motivating tasks for the groups. Another point mentioned was that some students might lack interest in working in groups or their failure to work in groups might have arisen from lack of experience in working as a team to solve a problem [a learning point, in this paper].

Another question asked teachers to list and choose from mentioned strategies they employed so as to reduce the problems they encountered during implementing group work in their own classes. The strategies they employed in their own classes included the following list.

Table 2: Group Work Implementation Strategies

Strategy	N
a. Carefully explaining the work to be done and setting up the groups	16
b. Making sure that all students know what to do	12
c. Moving slowly around the class without being less noticeable	12
d. Checking all students are using English	13
e. Not giving immediate correction for students' mistakes	10
f. Helping students have different roles (chair, secretary, etc.) in their groups	21
g. Others	

The data revealed that most teachers (n= 21) helped students have different roles in the groups. The assumption is that the students, when assigned to play such roles, could be engaged meaningfully in the tasks as they strive to fulfill minimum expectations in the groups. Other strategies used by the teachers included carefully explaining the work to be done and setting up the groups (n= 16), checking all students are using English (n= 13), making sure that all students know what to do (n= 12), moving slowly around the class (n= 12), and delaying feedback on students' mistakes (n= 10). Although there are variations among teachers in using strategies to solve or reduce group work implementation related problems, some EFL teachers did also mention other strategies outside of the list given. Only three people wrote a couple of strategies that they used in order to implement group work in their classes. These were establishing ground rules whereby every group could act in compliance with certain procedures, and identifying tasks that are appropriate to the students. Although these two practices were introduced, no specific strategies or procedures were recommended by the respondents as to how the group work related problems could be addressed better.

The teachers finally were asked to mention what strategies they liked to implement but failed to do so because of some difficulties. However, they mentioned only a few of the strategies but emphasized on the challenges they were unable to cope with as they tried to implement group work in their EFL classes. Besides, they forwarded some solutions to the challenges. Accordingly, two things were suggested as strategies they liked to use. First, they wanted to do a text book assessment and task selection in order to successfully implement the group work tasks. Second, they mentioned skills focused task arrangement as a strategy to minimize the burden of group work challenges.

The teachers emphatically wrote that the high number of students in a class (large class size) coupled by the big volume of the textbook and wide and complex tasks covering a range of skills and knowledge is a threat for them not to be effective in group work implementation. One of the teachers, for instance, complained about the textbook. He wrote " ... it [the textbook] is bulky to go through with our daily lesson plan'. Further, another teacher put the same thing in a different way. She wrote, "It [the textbook] instructs us to teach at least 3 lessons within 40 minutes. I think... when they [the textbook preparation team] improved the textbook, they forgot the time." The factors such as students'

reluctance and their low level of proficiency level in English were also reported to become impediments in any attempts to put group work into effect.

The two teachers' and the two students' responses to interview questions also confirmed the above findings of the questionnaire. Concerning the importance of using group work in English classroom, the first teacher noted that group work could provide students with opportunities of sharing ideas and experience, whereas the second teacher did not employ group work in his EFL classroom; he rather remarked that lecturing is more effective than using group discussion as a tool to teach English language skills. He noted, "You don't find one among ten" students who can work in the group discussion effectively... all merely present in the groups with little or no meaningful engagement in the 'tasks'. However, the two teachers stated that despite the students' low language ability, disinterest and misbehaviors, they tried to use group work occasionally in their classroom instructions. Even the second teacher noted that if the school had small classes and provided teachers with more time for lesson preparation, group work would be implemented in classrooms effectively. The first teacher also suggested that teachers could use best students to involve others students in group work activities, and he further noted the need for training teachers on how to manage group work in English classrooms.

The interviewed students' responses also largely confirm the importance of using group work in classrooms for learning English. Both students felt that they like to learn English working in groups, and the first student noted, "We are different students; we have different knowledge; what is known to one is not known to the other. ... Therefore, we help each other and share information. It also helps us to develop our confidence [of communication skills]." He also disclosed that teachers do not usually implement group work, they spend more time by giving explanations and they do not give chance to students to participate. The student further suggested that it would be nice if teachers give opportunities for the students to take part in the classroom discussions. Moreover, the two students pointed out lack of interest and self-confidence as major problems students face to effectively play their role in group work. The interviewed students, then, suggested that teachers have to design mechanisms for controlling the class during group work and minimizing dominance of one or two students in group discussions.

In addition, the data from classroom observation were organized in such a way that the report could reveal the following instructional features: grouping students, explaining group activities, coaching groups, textbook-based group activities and classroom management. Following, detailed discussions are given for each.

Grouping students: Teachers tried to use group work, as a means of teaching technique, in their classroom instruction by merely requesting students to get into groups with the already assigned seats of students. That is, the students were not required to change their seats for grouping purpose. They were rather supposed to get closer of each other at the time the teachers instructed the students to do so. For example, the observed teachers said, “in your desks... emu... make group” T1 Obs1; “work in groups ...” T2 Obs2. However, majority of the students (twenty to twenty-five students out of the total forty to forty-five students) did not seem to give attention to the teachers’ request/command for making groups. Some others still appeared not responsive to the request, and they were rather talking (in their mother tongue - Amharic) about something private, not academic. Even the few others, who tended to feel what the teachers requested them to get into groups, failed to do so as they were reluctant. They merely gazed at other groups who were interacting, or trying to interact with each other or discuss the activity given.

Explaining group activities: The teachers attempted to explain the activities to be performed in groups. They tried to inform students about what to do in groups, “there are about ten questions, try to discuss about the questions.” T1, Ob2. “Now, I want you to discuss ... what do you associate with drugs? “Just have a look at the three questions”. T2, Obs1. As can be seen from the quotations, the teachers’ explanation of the things students needed to do was a little bit short and lacked clarity. That is, the teachers did not give more background information about the activities the students are required to perform. Even the teachers should have checked students’ understanding by posing a few questions related to the group activities before inquiring students to get into the actual group work. The teachers should have also presented or discussed the purposes of group activities. Thus, may be because of the teachers’ poor explanations of the group activities most of the students, as they were observed, became confused and idle.

Coaching groups: The teachers were observed moving around the classes and approaching individual groups who were trying to involve in the given activities. The teachers tried to assist the groups by giving further explanations on instructions of the group activities. As mentioned above, large number of students could not catch up with the instructions the teachers gave. Thus, when students wanted to do the activities, they were forced to ask their teachers for more explanations on the how to go about the group activities. At that moment, the teachers moved towards individual groups and tried to show the students how to do the given activities or exercises. Pointing with his figure to the exercise book of students confined in a group, T2 says “No, this is not what you do...just try to discuss these questions?” Ob3. Of course, the teachers were not giving proper and adequate assistance to students who were in need of help as the students spent more time by discussing how to go about in doing the group activities. That is, despite the teachers’ movement around classes and coaching attempts, the students were confused and off tasked.

Textbook-based Group activities: The students were invited to get into groups for doing exercises and activities entirely taken from the students’ textbook. The teachers merely told students to work in groups with the stated instructions on the textbook. The only thing the teachers did was reading loudly the instructions of the textbook exercises that require students to carry out activities in groups. As mentioned above, the teachers’ role of modifying and contextualizing the existing exercises were very much limited. There was no further provision of examples and clarifications that students could draw on to properly engage in the group activities. Even in the instructional transition from group work to the whole class work, the teachers were not keen on giving feedback considering students’ effort. The teachers just asked for individual student response to the things students discussed in groups. They did not seek for group reports based on students’ group activities.

Classroom management: The teachers tried to control students’ attention by speaking or instructing loudly, and by repeatedly speaking out the instructions of the textbook and/or the purposes of the lessons. “Today ...today we see drugs, eha.., what did we see yesterday? Yesterday we discuss vocabulary...? Eha..” T1 Obs3. However, large number of

students did not seem to listen to what the teachers said. The students rather made noise, talked about something different from the lesson. They did not seem to be interested in the lesson and much of the conversations were made in Amharic; they uttered a few English words. In general, the teachers did not seem to be courageous enough to make control of the class. They seemed disappointed and reluctant to react to the classroom chaos.

Discussion

Examining the implementation of group work in EFL classroom instructions was the major concern of this study. Accordingly, the questionnaire and classroom observation data revealed that most of the teachers had positive understanding on the importance of using group in EFL classrooms. They felt that students should be given more opportunities of interaction that could facilitate development of their oral proficiency. Several scholars (e.g., Gass & Mackey, 2007; Payant & Reagan, 2018; Hidalgo & García Mayo, 2019) tend to support their idea with the general assumption that when students attempt to interact in groups they will be engaged in a meaningful language use during which they may notice their linguistic gaps so as to allow self-correction and reflection process to occur for better communication performance. Of course, the contribution of group work to students' second language development was also confirmed with empirical evidences (e.g., Teng, 2017; Fernández Dobao, 2014).

However, though the teachers in their questionnaire responses noted that most of their classroom lessons were conducted with group work activities, all of the teachers questioned the proper implementation of the group work activities in their classroom instructions. The teachers noted that students' poor participation and switching to their mother tongue were significant factors influencing their effective implementation. Therefore, the teachers' perceived importance and effective implementation of group work seemed to contradict with the actual practices the teachers usually experience during their classroom teaching. The teachers also noted proper grouping and clear instruction of the assigned groups would minimize, if not, solve the major obstacles the teachers face in the course of employing group work in their EFL classroom lessons effectively.

Generally, effective implementation of group work in the sampled schools seemed to be questioned despite the teachers' positive perception, and a few attempts of practicing in their classroom instructions. Even the teachers' practical classroom experiences showed problems related to classroom management, group coaching, student grouping, and textbook-based group- tasks. Thus, the teachers' attempt to employ group work in their EFL classrooms effectively seemed to reflect failure partly because of student and resource related factors.

Conclusions

This study addressed the techniques used and the difficulties EFL teachers faced when employing group work in their classrooms. Based on the findings, the following conclusions are drawn.

1. Despite the teachers' positive perception about the significant role of group work (in facilitating students' language learning) as well as its proper implementation in their classroom instructions, minimal efforts of employing group work were observed in their actual classroom instructions. Reasonable number of teachers felt that group work could have pedagogical and social relevance for teachers and students themselves. Nevertheless, using group work for providing students with opportunities of meaningful interaction still needs much more work on the part of the teachers.
2. The teachers seemed to have developed sense of discouragement by students' little cooperation and poor performance during group work activities. Teachers noted that students' little attention and poor classroom involvement created serious challenge to employ group work in their classrooms effectively.

Acknowledgement

The researchers of this study are grateful to Bahir Dar University for funding the research project. The participants of the study also deserve recognition for sharing their ideas and experiences.

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