# Factors influencing group work of students in learning English as a foreign language (EFL): A case study at a Vietnamese university

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| Article info. | ABSTRACT |
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| | *Group work has been largely used as an effective teaching strategy in English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom contexts to develop students' communicative proficiency in English. Although several studies on group work examined EFL teaching at universities in Vietnam and in the world, the question as to what factors influence EFL students' group work in classroom in the Mekong Delta remains unanswered. This paper, therefore, based on a case study at a university in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam, is aimed to explore the factors that influence EFL students' group work in classroom contexts as well as the difficulties students encountered in group work activities. The data were collected from the questionnaire surveys and interviews; 272 first-year students participated in the study. The findings showed that four factors influencing students' group work in class include classroom context, student interactions, the role of the teacher and the tasks. Of the four factors, student interaction was ranked the most important factor. Moreover, challenges in group working were reported as students' mixed abilities, difference in viewpoints, use of Vietnamese during discussion, time limitation and topic difficulty levels.* |
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## 1 INTRODUCTION

It is widely known that group work is an increasingly used teaching strategy in English as a foreign language. The phrase 'better English, more opportunities' becomes a buzzword mostly used by university students to address their goals of learning English. It is essential that English can help students prepare well for their future careers by not only equipping them with a useful source of linguistic, social and cultural knowledge but also providing them with greater access to updated and advanced information in order to facilitate their communication in a fast changing world and to deal with numerous learning challenges.

The Vietnamese Education Law 2005 and Higher Education Reform Agenda (HERA) by 2020 assert that English has been a passport to success in educational and socio-economic contexts. Therefore, there is pressure on lecturers to make instructional changes that highlight active teaching and learning (Pham, 2010; Nguyen, 2013). However, in a traditional English language classroom, teacher has authority over students who were passive recipients of knowledge in their learning process. As a result of this traditional approach, students are not given

opportunities to take active roles in learning English. In other words, they do not have to use English with other students or to share ideas in groups. As the focus of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach is to develop learners' communicative competence, communication skills are called upon to be the target of Vietnam educational reform, as highlighted by HERA. This claim is supported by Brown (2000) that "Communicative competence is widely accepted as the best way to ensure successful language teaching" (p. 266). Therefore, the influence of CLT has shifted traditional teaching from teacher-dominated to learner-centeredness.

Group work, one of the communicative activities, is mostly used in English as a foreign language (EFL) effective teaching strategy to assist students in developing their proficiency in English (Brumfit, 1984; Gardner, 1985; Doff, 1988; Long, 1989; Davis, 1993; Cohen, 1994; Csernica et al., 2002; Johnson & Johnson, 2003; Chang, 2010). According to Brumfit (1984), group work is often considered an essential feature of communicative language teaching. This view implies that group work provides students with an opportunity to generate ideas before speaking in public and presenting more highly organized ideas. Besides, group work helps students and teachers bridge the gap between English language input and output by interactions not only between students and the teacher only, but also more importantly, between students. Long and Porter (1985) support the claim that group work can promote student practice, motivation, and positive classroom atmosphere.

While several studies have been carried out to investigate the use of group work into EFL teaching at universities in Vietnam (e.g., Le and McDonald, 2004; Le, 2006; Tat, 2007) and in the world, question about the factors that influence EFL first-year students' group work in classroom in the Mekong Delta in Vietnam remains unanswered. Therefore, this study is examined the factors that influence EFL students' group work in a university classroom of Medicine and Pharmacy in the Mekong Delta within the context of Vietnamese teaching and learning.

## 2 METHODOLOGY

The study is a descriptive research using a mixed methods approach. This design allows to triangulate the data and more objective information about the study under investigation (Creswell, 2003). The data were collected from questionnaires and interviews. In the quantitative method, questionnaires were employed to gain understanding of the factors

that influence students' group work in English as a foreign language classroom practices. The qualitative method using in-depth semi-structured interviews with open and ended questions aimed to explore insights into students' views of the effects of group work on student learning.

272 first-year students of Can Tho University of Medicine and Pharmacy were invited to participate in the study. Sixty-four percent of the total respondents are females (n=174) and thirty-six percent are males (n=98).

The questionnaires delivered to students encompass four sections: (1) personal information, (2) the frequency of using group work in class, (3) factors influence students' group work in class, and (4) the important level of four factors influence students' group work in class. The survey questionnaire was designed using five-point Likert-scale questions (with responses ranging from (1) strongly disagree, (2) disagree, (3) neutral, (4) agree, to (5) strongly agree). A 30-item questionnaire was delivered to 272 participants to gain the data about factors influencing students' group work in class. All questions were translated into Vietnamese to make sure that the participants understood each question clearly. Both the English and Vietnamese versions of the questionnaires were double-checked and were sent to the supervisor of the researcher for revision and feedback.

Based on students' English *grades during* the first semester of the academic year of 2014-2015, ten students including five good students and five fairly good students were randomly selected for interviewing (nine open and closed questions). Each interview took approximately half an hour.

The quantitative data from the questionnaires were analyzed using the computer software statistical package SPSS, version 22, focusing on the reliability and the descriptive statistics for the mean, standard deviation, and the frequency of each cluster in the questionnaire. The reliability coefficient is high ($\alpha$= .752) which means that the questionnaire employed was confirmed to be reliable.

In order to answer the research question, a one-sample *t*-test was employed on each cluster of the questionnaire to investigate whether there is a significant difference between two mean scores in order to identify the factors that influenced students' group work. The paired-samples *t*-tests were run to determine which factor was the most important and which was the least important one.

Qualitative data from the interviews were transcribed and then translated into English. All of the

responses were coded and checked for accuracy and clarity.

## 3 FINDINGS

### 3.1 Insights into four factors influencing students' group work

The descriptive statistics test was conducted to identify how often group work was used in clas

room. Group work activities often used in teaching and learning process are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1 shows that 176 of the total respondents (64.7%) agreed that group work is often used in class; and that 40 participants (14.7%) reported that group work is sometimes used in class. It can be concluded that group work is most often used as communicative technique in teaching English at the university where the study was conducted.
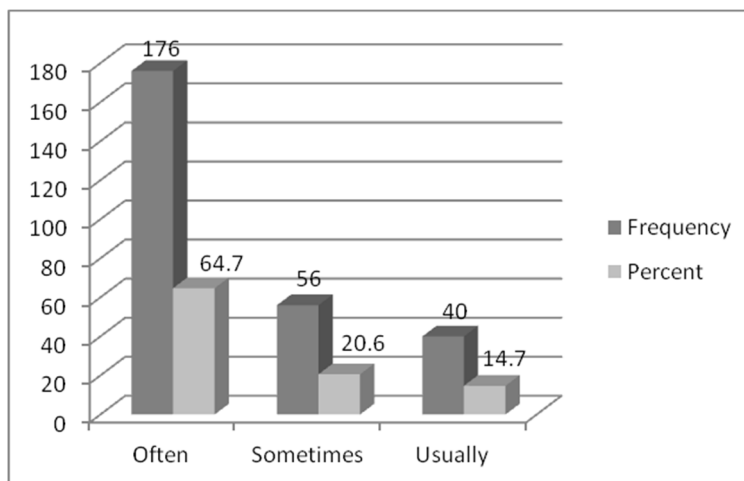


**Fig. 1: The frequency and percentage of using group work**

A one-sample *t*-test was conducted on all factors in the inventory questionnaire to investigate whether their mean was significantly different from the

accepted mean value (M=3.0). The results of the test are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: A One-sample *t*-test for the sample mean**

|  | M | SD | t | df | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Mean scores | 3.85 | .21 | 65.32 | 271 | .00 |

The sample mean (*M*=3.85) was significantly different from the accepted mean value (*M*= 3.0), the average point of five-point Likert scale. It means that the participants considered some factors presented in the questionnaire influenced students' group work in class. However, it does not ensure that all factors presented in the questionnaire were

perceived as factors influencing students' group work in class. Hence, one-sample *t*-test was employed on each cluster of the questionnaire to examine whether the mean scores were different from the accepted mean to determine which factor influenced group work and which did not. Table 2 illustrates the result in detail.

**Table 2: A one-sample *t*-test for four factors**

| Factors | M | SD | t | df | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Classroom context | 3.78 | .33 | 39.01 | 271 | .00 |
| Interaction between students | 3.61 | .34 | 29.45 | 271 | .00 |
| Teacher' s role | 3.92 | .27 | 55.66 | 271 | .00 |
| The tasks | 4.09 | .33 | 55.31 | 271 | .00 |

Table 2 indicates that there are four factors perceived as influencing students' group work, including classroom context, interaction between students, teacher' s role, and the tasks, since the mean scores of these factors are significantly different and higher than 3.0, the accepted mean value of the study (*M*>3.61, *p*=.00).

The frequency and percentage of the responses in the questionnaire were examined to identify the proportion of the factors perceived as prominent factors influencing students' group work. A descriptive statistics test was run and the results are shown in Table 3.

**Table 3: Factors influencing students' group work**

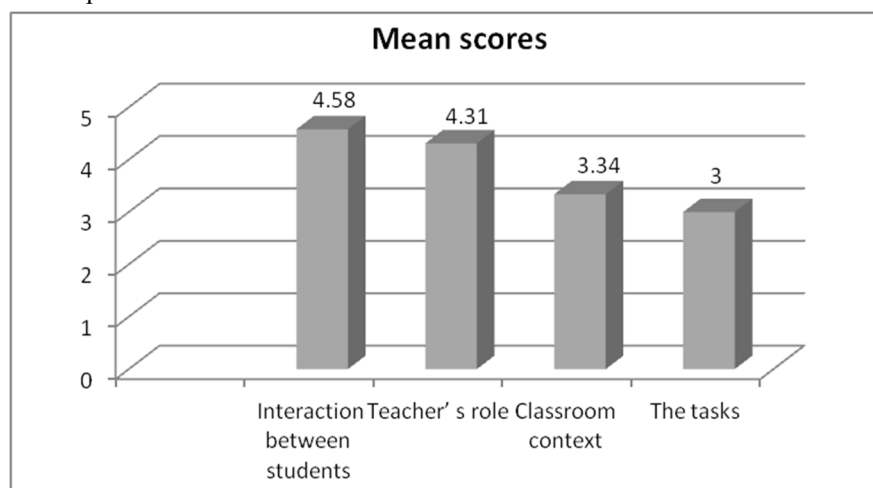| Factors | Unimportant | | Important | | Very important | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | F | P | F | P | F | P |
| Classroom context | 35 | 12.9 | 124 | 45.6 | 113 | 41.5 |
| Interaction between students | 0 | 0 | 21 | 7.7 | 251 | 92.2 |
| Teacher' s role | 0 | 0 | 13 | 4.8 | 259 | 95.3 |
| The tasks | 57 | 21.0 | 158 | 58.1 | 57 | 21.0 |

*F= frequency, P= percentage*

Analysis of the statistical data indicates that the prominent factors influencing students' group work in class were interaction between students and the role of the teacher. In fact, 92.2 percent and 95.3 percent of surveyed respondents (n=251, n= 259, respectively) perceived these two factors play an essential role in group work.

The first paired-samples *t*-test was run on the classroom context and interaction between students. The results indicated that the mean score of interaction between students (M=4.58, SD=.63) was significantly higher than the mean for classroom context (M=3.34, SD=.77) (t=-21.78, df= 271, p=.00). The result supports the claim that students perceived interaction between students as being more important than classroom context.

Another paired-samples *t*-test was conducted on the role of the teacher and the tasks. The results revealed that the mean score of the role of the teacher (M=4.31, SD=.56) was significantly greater than that of the tasks (M=3.00, SD=.65) (t=25.782; df= 271, p=.00). The result supports the conclusion that students perceived the role of the teacher is remarkably more important than the tasks. The last paired-samples *t*-test was run on interaction between students and the role of the teacher. The results revealed that the mean score of interaction between students (M=4.58, SD=.63) was significantly higher than the mean for the role of the teacher (M=4.31, SD=.56) (t=5.23, df=271, p=.00). It is clear that interaction between students is more important than the role of the teacher.

Figure 2 shows the mean scores of four factors influencing students' group work.



**Fig. 2: The mean scores of four factors influencing students' group work**

As can be seen in Figure 2, of the four factors, the most important factor influencing students' group work in class is interaction between students, and the least important one is the tasks.

**3.2    Insights into students' views of the impact of group work**

*3.2.1    The classroom context*

The classroom context including seating arrangement and group size is reported to be the first fac-

tor influencing students' group work in class. All of five good participants revealed that they preferred to be free to choose new or unfamiliar friends instead of the same friend in their groups and would like to sit with students who were at higher level of English language proficiency. The fairly good students shared their viewpoints contrary to those of the good students. For example, Thao, one of the good students, reported that she liked sitting with the same friends in groups or

with the friends at the same English language proficiency levels. However, Hang, a fairly good student, presented her different views on this.

*I prefer working with different friends in groups ...Because I can learn more new things from each person in order to improve my knowledge as well as to make friends with them. ... I would like group with good students, they can share their good experiences.* (Thao, Interview Extract 1)

*I want to work with my friends at the same levels in order to ask questions about any unclear problem easily, I don't feel shy...* (Hang, Interview Extract 2)

When asked about the appropriate group size, all of the interviewees claimed that an appropriate group should be from three students to five students. Thu, in particular, highlighted the importance of the involvement of ideas shared with others with regard to communication:

*... in a group, there should be from three members to five members.... In class, the teacher doesn't have much time for group work, so if there are too many students in a group, there will be many ideas and we can't finish the tasks ...* (Thu, Interview Extract 1)

The extracts from all the interviewees indicate the students' view of the role of their participation in speaking activities which allow them to enhance their English. It appears that, on the contrary, shyness or feeling of anxiety in relation to English language competency, the fairly good students considered their seating arrangement with their close or familiar peers.

### 3.2.2   Interaction between students

The data obtained from the questionnaire prove that interaction between students is the most important factor influencing students' group work in class. The findings from interviews showed how well students communicate with another in groups and how they solve disagreements in their groups.

All interviewees revealed that they interacted with others by asking questions, making comments and responding with nods and shaking heads, with sounds of agreement or understanding. However, the interviewed students in the good group were more proactive than ones in the fairly good group. In contrast, the interviewed students in the fairly good group revealed that they were also willing to participate in group but they only responded to their friends when being asked. For example, Hoang and Nguyen shared their opposite views on this type of interaction:

*In my group, I actively ask questions, share my ideas with my friends and always answer my friends' questions. I often smile, use eye contacts, gestures such as shaking, nodding my head* (Hoang, Interview Extract 3)

*Due to lack of vocabulary, I make lots of mistakes and don't want to ask anything, I just listen and will answer if necessary* (Nguyen, Interview Extract 4)

The ways that two interviewed participant groups solving the disagreements in group work were rather different. All five interviewees in the good student group were flexible in finding a solution to their friends' disagreements. They would actively solve the challenges by themselves. To settle the disagreements, they would identify which ideas were common, explain those for all members to understand, and finally vote by raising hands. Passively, the remaining interviewees in the fairly good group indicated that they often asked their teachers for help.

From the interview results, it can be concluded that students knew how to communicate with one another during group work process and they tried to solve disagreements in their groups.

### 3.2.3   The role of the teacher

The majority of interviewees excitedly expressed their thoughts of the teacher's roles. They revealed that the teacher played a major role in group work as supporting and monitoring students' progress. Other interviewees shared that the teacher's completely guided instruction could be the most effective way in helping students learn and complete the tasks. Mai elaborated on how she recognized the role of the teacher:

*Teacher's instructions give us a clear purpose, we know how to do our tasks and can ask if we are not clear something, so we can complete our works....* (Mai, Interview Extract 5).

### 3.2.4   The tasks

The tasks for students in group work also influence the effectiveness of group work. The tasks were reported to be meaningful, stick to the lesson and have clear purposes. In particular, it is necessary to be appropriate with students' level and the time allowance.

Of the ten interviewees, seven of them showed that the tasks in group work activities were suitable for their level and relevant to the lessons. The teacher gave students enough time to complete each activity. The three interviewees indicated that their teachers sometimes applied group work activities

that are beyond their levels and they sometimes could not complete their tasks.

*These tasks are appropriate with my level, I like them… My teacher gives enough time for us to finish the task…* (Cuc, Interview Extract 6)

*in my class, some group work activities which are rather difficult… We can't finish the tasks on time because a few topics are strange and I don't know enough vocabulary* (Thuy, Interview Extract 7)

### 3.2.5 Difficulties the participants encountered in group work

The difficulties that the interviewed students encountered are related to students' competences, variety of opinions, and the use of Vietnamese to communicate with others. In addition, students reported that they were not given enough time to complete the tasks at difficult levels.

Three interviewees said that they did not know how to deal with differences in personal thinking and the use of Vietnamese to respond to the questions. It took so much time to make unanimous decisions. They gave the following responses when asked about the difficulties in doing group work.

Due to lack of vocabulary, the other participants did not know how to express their ideas with their friends and had to use Vietnamese.

Besides, there were a few obstacles relevant to the tasks such as not enough time for finishing the tasks, the topics were challenging.

## 4 DISCUSSION

The present study focused on four key factors influencing students' group work in class including the classroom context, the interaction between students, the role of the teacher and the tasks. The findings on these factors in this study concur with those of prior studies in relation to group work in EFL classroom contexts, as highlighted by Nation (1989) and Blatchford and his colleagues (2003). In fact, Nation (1989) pointed out several factors which fit with group work, including the learning goals of group work, the task, the way information is distributed, the seating arrangement of the members of group, and the social relationship among the group members. He claimed that if these factors were well suited with each other, group work was likely to be successful. In contrast, group work was likely to be unsuccessful. Also, Blatchford and his colleagues (2003) listed four key important factors describing group work on regular classroom conditions, namely the classroom context, the interaction between pupils, the role of the teacher and the

tasks. Blatchford and his colleagues (2003) further posited that these factors might be a useful framework for teachers when organizing group work in their classroom practices.

In comparison with these factors, the findings of the present study pointed out that the interaction between students was the most important one; the role of the teacher was less important than the interaction between students but more important than two rest factors - the classroom context and the tasks. Interaction through group work maximizes the opportunities to practice as more students speak for most of the time. Interaction helps students develop language learning and social skills, and so maximizing interaction in the classroom is an important part of teaching and learning process (Bossert *et al.*, 1985; Moore, 1989; Bassano, 2003; Beebe & Masterson, 2003; Allwright & Baily, 2004; McDonough, 2004; Chen & Hird, 2006; Brown, 2007; Burke, 2011; Taqi & Al-Nouh, 2014). The findings of the present study indicated that interaction between students was evaluated as the most important factor in comparison with the others in group work. The findings of the study fit well with Vygotsky (1978) who maintained that interaction was essential to the development of individual thought and Webb (1982) who claimed the importance of student interaction and the role of individuals in groups, thereby influencing on learning. Importantly, one of the most essential goals in teaching English as a Foreign Language has been to prepare students to be able to use the language. Hence, the more students interact, the more their language skills such as listening and speaking are improved.

For teachers, group work can be excellent tools to promote student interaction and individual work. It seems clear to appeal to students using intrapersonal intelligences. The role of the teacher in group work is a complex set of roles, which varies from different activities and classroom contexts. The teacher is likely a monitor, encouraging students and providing correct feedback to student work progress. The findings of this study supported the claim of those of Watcyn-Jones' (2002) study, stressing the role of the teacher right from the beginning of giving lessons. Watcyn-Jones (2002) also indicated that while checking students' progress, it is useful for a teacher to have a small notebook or a piece of paper on which he or she could jot down any common mistakes from his or her students.

From the selective analysis of Watcyn-Jones (2002) for the findings mentioned above, it can be

inferred that the role shift of the teacher from a facilitator to an organizer and a monitor is needed. By taking these roles, the teacher is likely to facilitate their practice and help students manage disagreements. Students' mistakes should be corrected in order to ensure they could understand that making mistakes is a natural thing in the language learning process.

The tasks were found to help student group members understand the purpose of the group activities when students used their language skills and time to complete the activities. The findings indicate that the tasks were evaluated as the least important factor in the four key factors influencing group work. Additionally, the findings also showed that the tasks should be interesting, meaningful, adhere to the lesson and be appropriate with students' level as well as the allotted time. In fact, the more interesting and meaningful the tasks are, the more motivation students gain. Also, if the tasks are relevant to the lesson and useful to their daily lives, students can brainstorm the tasks relevant and useful to the student in his or her learning process.

Group work promotes an active learning process, participation and interaction among students. However, there are a number of problems that arise during group work for both teachers and students. The findings of the present study only focused on difficulties relating to students e.g., the different abilities of the students, the variety of students' opinions leading to disagreements, using Vietnamese to discuss, the time limited and some the difficult topics. The findings of this study confirmed those of some studies (e.g., Terenzini *et al.*, 2001; Skrzyński, 2005). Skrzyński (2005) stated that when working in groups students sometimes used their mother tongue to express something they were not able to express in a foreign language. On the other hand, according to Terenzini *et al.* (2001), low and high level diversity of the students might be negatively related to learning gains. Nevertheless, the findings of the present study did not point out all problems that students met in doing group work activities as mentioned in the literature review.

## 5 CONCLUSIONS

The findings from this study provide both university administrators and language teachers with insights and implications about how group work in EFL teaching and learning can be promoted to engage student learning in a more effective way. It is, therefore, a strong need for teachers to design more group work which instills confidence into students in an interactive and engaging learning environ-

ment. The findings also raise teachers' awareness of students' interests in group work, and in particular, may pave the way for teachers to diversify their teaching methods or innovative approaches that facilitate student learning in the English learning context, and its curricula are mainly designed for examinations (Ministry of Education and Training, 2006). The study presents the difficulties encountered by the students while working in groups, suggesting the nature of the group work to suit students' learning preference. More significantly, including group work in EFL classrooms allows teachers to see the importance of enhancement of their role shift from traditional lecturing to more student-centered approach, thereby encouraging students to take a greater role and responsibility in their learning process as active learners. The findings also provide implications for teachers to conduct further research into its effectiveness and other factors that may influence how students learn for the better outcomes and minimize the challenges that group work may hinder student participation. If this can be done, teachers will find their career path rewarding and entertaining as they help change students' learning ways to respond to the need of quality teaching and learning required by Vietnamese government with regard to the fundamental and comprehensive renovation of higher education system.

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