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## Role of Group work in Promoting Student to Student Interaction and Motivation in the EFL Classroom in the UAE

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### Introduction

Group work is an essential pedagogical tool to be used inside any classroom. Cooperation and collaboration are an important part of our daily routine in work and school settings. Students put to work in groups should be in small groups. Having large groups of students defeats one of the important goals of using group work and collaborative learning, which is giving the students the opportunity to speak and interact with one another. Moreover, many teachers agree on the importance of group work and collaborative learning, yet not all are familiar with the ways of implementing collaborative learning and how much of an impact it can have on students' motivation towards learning.

Group work has several advantages in the classroom. First, it helps to create engaging communication as teachers no longer play a dominant role in the classroom and helps them overcome the problem of large classes by allowing more students a chance to interact and speak. Second, group work provides students with a sense of flourishing creativity and literacy environment, as they do not need to discuss all classes, but only the members of the group. Third, group work allows students to be more accountable and self-involved because there is no need for the student to rely on other students to take part in the learning. Moreover, group work plays a major role in enhancing students' motivation and interaction towards learning in the language classroom.

### Literature Review

#### Importance of Group Work

Group work is essential inside any classroom. Cooperation and collaboration are an integral part of our daily routine in work and school settings. Brown (2000) states that the term 'group' has a variety of meanings. He defines group work, saying that when individuals work together, they are dependent on each other and have a common goal. Brown (2001) also explains that group work is a generic term covering various techniques. Two or more students are assigned a task that involves collaboration and self-initiated language. He emphasizes the reality that it implies small-group work referring to groups of perhaps six or fewer students. Large groups defeat one of the essential goals of group work, allowing the students to speak. Richards et al. (1985) describe group work as a collaborative experience requiring the cooperation of a



specific group of learners. It can be concluded from these definitions that group work is a learning experience involving learners working together in a small team or group to conduct a task to provide students with further opportunities to use or practice the language.

In a study about Task, Group, and Task-Group Interactions, Long(1990) mentions a few pedagogic advantages that group work has (including pair work). He states that (1) group work increases the amount of language practice opportunities; (2) group work facilitates individualized instruction allowing students to work at their own pace; (3) group work can assist in enhancing the affective classroom climate, whereby the intimacy of the small group often is particularly valuable for linguistically insecure students and finally; (4) group work can help motivate learners due to the pedagogic variety it brings to a lesson.

## **Implementation of Group Work**

Schools and teachers are applying group and pair work in their classrooms, but is what they are using structured well and aligned with the curriculum and does it cater to the student's needs? Does group work motivate students and get them engaged in the lesson? Many questions and concerns need to be focused on to ensure the proper group work structure. Baines et al. (2008) mention the Social Pedagogic Research into Group Work project (SPRinG), which focuses on three main concerns of group and pair work: Relationships are essential for productive group work, successful group work requires an efficient learning setting and teachers need to organize and support group work experience.

The SPRinG method is often focused on the belief that group work must be viewed strategically in the broader sense of the classroom as a whole. This involves the following three major dimensions: (a) classroom level considerations such as layout, seating arrangements and class size; (b) group characteristics such as size and number, structure and stability; and (c) group work activities and the manner in which they are implemented and used to promote learning within a lesson and curriculum. The goal is to implement group work into both classrooms and curriculum. One common obstacle teachers face with integrating group work into the lesson is not having enough time to implement it on a regular basis while finishing the curriculum in time. We mustn't examine small group learning independently of the curriculum and the classroom culture but integrate it into the curriculum and make it part of the lesson. This way, we ensure that the lesson is delivered whilst allowing time to involve group/pair activities in the classroom (Slavin et al., 2003; Webb & Palincsar, 1996).

The way group work is implemented in the L2 classroom can vary. It should be implemented in a way that promotes L2 learning. Foster (1998) involved adult ESL learners engaged in pair and group work and found that her students rarely resorted to such strategies. To explain the results, Foster maintained that, as in ordinary social interaction between native speakers, the L2 learners appeared not to be correcting each other so as to avoid a threat to face. Moreover, Aline and Hosoda (2009) supported Foster's position, as their study conducted in a Japanese university setting, revealed that peers rarely provided linguistic support or corrected others in their groups. On the other hand, other studies proved that if group work is scaffolded in a proper manner and students were offered appropriate instruction and feedback, then group work will promote student-student interaction and motivate students to learn in an L2 classroom. In other instances, pairs/groups within the same classroom have been shown to differentially engage students in linguistic scaffolding (Storch, 2001; Swain & Lapkin, 1998).

There are several ways in which group work is implemented in the L2 classroom. These ways of implementation each has a purpose to motivate students into getting more engaged and interacting with their group members during group/pair tasks and assure the delivery of the goal or objective of the lesson to the students.

## **Collaborative Learning in the EFL Classroom**

Collaborative learning is a concept in which students are paired or grouped for the purpose of reaching an academic goal. "Collaborative learning" as a term refers to a method of instruction in which students

with varied performance levels perform in small groups to achieve a common goal. As put forward by Johnson and Johnson (1986), evidence suggests that there is a high level of thinking and longer retention of information in teams that work cooperatively in comparison to those students who tend to work individually and quietly.

When a student/learner is learning a second or foreign language, they must learn the language's structure as well as its use in the suitable situations. This is important because in group work interactions, students will use the English Language to interact with one another as well as complete writing tasks and it is necessary that the student knows how to use the structure of the language. For example, when an Arab learns English, he/she may have a habit of putting the adjectives after nouns whereas in English, it needs to be done in reverse order. When the learners belong to diverse backgrounds, it is important that the teacher creates a pleasant atmosphere for collaborative learning and group tasks where learners feel welcome, happy, empowered and ready to learn the subject being taught. A supportive environment is therefore needed in English classrooms, especially for English as a foreign language learners (EFL). For EFL Learners, two practices are important in order to improve the language, i.e., dedicate time for learning and then practice what they have learned. In a group interaction, the learners use English to explain their concepts and contribute to the work in their structured activities. This interaction allows the teacher to gauge the level of learning and the progress of the learner in the English language (Rao, 2019).

## **The Present Study**

The purpose of this study is to discover the role of group work and collaborative learning in promoting student to student interaction and motivating students to learn English in a Foreign Language (EFL) Classroom. The present study uses an online student questionnaire survey as well as a teacher interview as a qualitative research instrument to discover the perceptions of students and teachers on the implementation of group work and collaborative learning and how it enhances motivation and collaboration in the English online and physical classroom. The majority of research relevant to this in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Region has investigated the impact of group work on student interaction and language acquisition in the EFL classroom, but none have addressed all three variables together-group work, interaction and motivation (see, e.g. Fernández, 2012; Xu & Kou, 2018; Ahlquist, 2019; Alharbi, 2008). To fill the gap, this study will examine whether and to what degree group work in the EFL classroom improves student to student interaction within the groups, which in turn will increase levels of student motivation towards learning in the EFL classroom.

Guided by the purpose of this study, the following research questions were formulated:

1. Does group work promote collaborative interaction in the UAE EFL classroom?
2. Does group work motivate students to interact in the UAE EFL classroom?
3. How does group work enhance motivation and collaborative interaction in the UAE EFL Classroom?
4. What is the students' attitude and perception towards implementing collaborative interaction in the UAE EFL classroom?
5. What is the teacher's attitude and perception towards implementing collaborative interaction in the UAE EFL classroom?

## **Finding and Discussion**

The student questionnaire findings have revealed that group work is an important aspect of teaching especially in the English language classes where English is an L2. Group work is equally essential for physical and online classes, and the students and the teacher acknowledge the importance. In the student questionnaire, the findings show that collaborative learning allows students belonging to different

performance levels to work together for a common goal and improve their performance level. Collaborative online group activities positively impact English language learning and the use of English language in group discussions and regular conversations. Students learn to socialize, interact with other students and work with students who are different from them and develop healthy working relationships with others through collaborative group learning.

Example: Results of question 11 from the student questionnaire are displayed below in Figure 1.

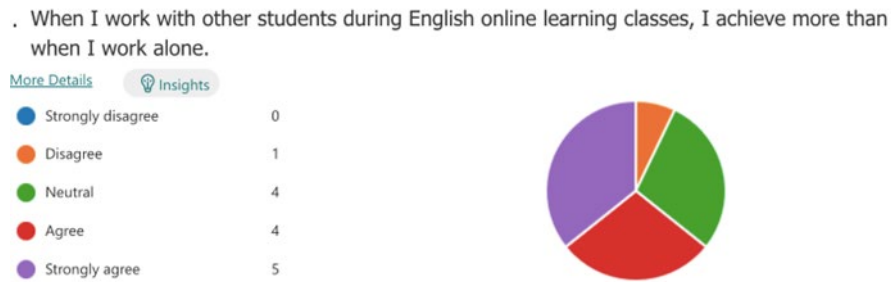


Figure 1. Student questionnaire.

As can be seen from Figure 1, 60% of the students either agree or strongly agree that working with other students during the English online lessons helps them achieve more than when working individually. 30% of the students only mentioned that they don't mind working individually to get more work done.

The student survey revealed that collaborative learning is a significant factor in enhancing student understanding of the English language. The findings show that students are more motivated to learn English when working collaboratively in groups. Moreover, having group discussions where students get to share and exchange their ideas helps build their confidence and improve their speaking skills. The results show that students enjoy participating in online collaborative learning activities as this helps them better understand the English language material.

The teacher interview gathered insights from a teacher's opinion about collaborative learning and group work in English learning classrooms both online and in the physical classroom. The teacher's interview also validates the majority opinions presented by the student participants in response to their questionnaire and survey. The teacher believes that group work improves class participation of those students who are otherwise non-participative in the class. Based on the teacher's responses in the interview, group work also encourages healthy competition as the competition is not between the individuals but the groups to prove themselves better. To prove themselves, students within the same group interact more collaboratively. Moreover, the teacher strongly believes that most students in her class feel motivated to learn English when working collaboratively and interacting with one another in group tasks during online classes.

## Method(s)

### Research Setting and Participants

The study took place in a boys' public school located in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Dubai that works under the curriculum of the Ministry of Education (MoE). Two classes of Grade 12 male students in the school were selected for the study whereby one class had 10 students and the other had 5, making a total of 15 participants. 53% of the students were Emirati nationals and 47% were of other Arab origin (Egyptians, Mauritians and Syrians). The study participants included both lower-mid and intermediate

students. An English Language grade 12 teacher also participated in an interview as part of this study. The teacher was female and in the 30-40 age group.

## **Data Collection Procedure**

Students' data were collected remotely due to the Covid-19 pandemic using an online survey questionnaire using Microsoft Forms. The online survey questionnaire was given to the grade 12 English teacher to administer to students during an online lesson on Microsoft Teams. At the time, clear oral and written instructions were given to students before answering the online survey questionnaire. Data were collected three weeks before the end of term three of academic year 2020/2021 (Term three runs for eleven weeks). Data was collected in week 8 before final exams were administered. The data collected from the teacher was done through an interview conducted through zoom and was recorded.

## **Discussion**

The findings show that students are more motivated to learn English when working collaboratively in groups. The results of the student online survey and the teacher interview clearly show that group work promotes and enhances collaborative learning and interaction through a healthy sense of competition. Students like a challenge, primarily when they work with group members towards the same goal of completing a given task in the English class. Collaborative online group activities positively impact English language learning and the use of English language in group discussions and regular conversations. This helps develop healthy working relationships with others in the group.

The findings also show that students are more motivated to learn English when working in groups. Furthermore, holding group discussions where students share, and exchange ideas helps build confidence and enhance speaking abilities. Students appreciate participating in online collaborative learning activities because they help them better comprehend the English language subject. Most students agreed that they enjoy working collaboratively with other students in the English class. Students find group tasks and learning collaboratively motivating, encouraging them to participate in the English class.

Based on the results, most students agreed that group work motivates them to interact in the English classroom virtually. However, some students (30%) mentioned they preferred working in groups and were more motivated to interact with other students in the physical classroom. For instance, Salem's response was "Yes, because it motivates me to learn more and practice the English language when speaking to my group mates". However, Obaid mentioned that he prefers face to face group work and collaborative learning because seeing his group mates helps him interact with them more efficiently.

According to the teacher interview findings, group work promotes class participation for students who are typically non-participative. Students feel more confident behind the screen in online classrooms, which increases class engagement. The results from the interview also show that student to student interaction allows students to challenge and support each other at the same time. In one of the student survey questions, a student, Majid said, "Yes, I feel motivated to learn in a group, because I acquire certain English Language skills such as listening skills when working collaboratively online with other students".

## **Theoretical Implications**

The first implication is that group work is an important aspect of teaching especially in the English language classes where English is an L2. Group work is equally necessary for the students and teachers to acknowledge physical and online classes and their importance. English language teachers can apply for group work and collaborative learning tasks in their classrooms to enhance the participation of students and promote student to student interaction. As teachers apply group work and collaborative learning in the

English Language classroom, students belonging to different performance levels will be able to work together for a common goal and hence improve their level of performance. Implementation of collaborative learning especially in online learning can motivate those shy, quiet students who usually do not participate in group tasks that can be applied through breakout rooms in Microsoft Teams during an online class. Students can have group discussions and exchange their ideas on a task. Teachers can apply collaborative learning and group tasks to encourage healthy competition as the competition is not between the individuals but the groups to prove themselves better. To prove themselves, students within the same group interact more collaboratively. This results in students' motivation to learn English when working collaboratively in groups. Collaborative learning allows students belonging to different performance levels to work together for a common goal and hence improve their level of performance.

Secondly, teachers can also benefit from the implementation of group work and collaborative interaction by improving the speaking skills of students through group discussions and conversations when working on a collaborative activity. Teachers can use group work and implement collaborative activities in the English language class to enhance students' English speaking skills. Having group discussions where students get to share and exchange their ideas helps build their confidence and improve their speaking skills. Collaborative online group activities impact the learning of English language and the use of English language in group discussions and regular conversations in a positive manner. Teachers can apply speaking activities in groups and turn it into a collaborative activity. This way, even the quiet or non-participative students will be motivated to speak up and get involved in the activity.

### **Conclusions and Limitations**

One of the present study's limitations is that students are familiar with collaborative learning in the physical classroom, but the sudden shift to online instruction due to the Covid-19 pandemic created challenges to students. For instance, students sometimes faced technical issues and did not know how to configure some of the features in the software applications to learn online. However, with some of the challenges students still managed to work smoothly in assigned online group tasks. However, as they went through the process, students enjoyed collaborative learning online more and felt more motivated to learn during English lessons.

Another limitation was due to the limited time and resources, the study was conducted on a small sample (15 students and one teacher) in one school setting. A future study can include different schools teaching different curriculums like the American Common Core Curriculum or the British Curriculum, so that the impact of group work can not only be noticed on students with different performance levels but also with different teaching materials and curricula. Moreover, future studies could be done on both private and public schools to cover a range of learning abilities and different nationalities and native backgrounds. Students of private schools tend to be from different nationalities which might give another perspective on the findings of the study.

Finally, the participants in this study consisted of only male students. However, future studies should also include female students. Female students are usually more reserved in the class, especially when it comes to class participation. The teacher also mentioned in the interview responses that online classes allow even the shyest students to participate more in the group activities as well as in overall class sessions.

To conclude, the current study aimed to find the role of group work and collaborative learning activities in promoting students' interaction and motivation with secondary UAE EFL learners in a public school. The results from the student online questionnaire survey and teacher interview responses conclude that: (a) the importance of Group is acknowledged by teachers and students equally, for both physical and online classes, (b) students believe that group work makes their English learning and the use of English language easier, (c) students believe that group work allows them to manage their work better, participate more in the class and learn to work in cooperation with students who are different from them, (d) most students also believe that they feel motivated to learn English when working collaboratively in online classes, (e) group

work enhances motivation and adds to collaborative interaction between students during collaborative tasks as it provides students with the opportunity to peer assess and reflect on their ideas and answers before going ahead with their work and this in itself gives them confidence; especially those students who are always hesitant to express themselves on their own, (f) group work promotes collaborative interactions by encouraging students to work on the same goal and learning from the feedback which they receive from their peers instead of the teacher, (g) the teacher also believes that group work improves class participation of even those students who are otherwise non-participative in the class. The online classes also enhance class participation as the students feel more confident behind the screen, (h) according to the teacher, group work and collaborative learning also encourages healthy competition as the competition is not between the individuals but the groups to prove themselves better, (i) a significant finding from both students and the teacher's perspective was that when students work collaboratively in groups, they get more motivated to interact and engage more than they would when working individually. This was also noticed in the work students did in groups as they showed more understanding and success to achieve the group task objective and the lesson outcomes.

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