Exploring the Organization of Consecutive Group-Work Activities in English Lessons: A Case Study at a Public University

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ABSTRACT

Group work is considered a practical pedagogical method applied at all educational levels, especially in fostering students' collaboration, learner autonomy, and engagement in language learning. However, how to implement group work activities efficiently depends on various factors, among which the teacher's role is centered as a designer, organizer, and facilitator. This study presents a groupwork application in classroom management technique, in which students are grouped once and remain in fixed groups for all English course activities throughout the semester. The method has been implemented on multiple occasions with consistently positive outcomes. A qualitative study was later conducted through interviews with nine students and two teachers following the application of this technique during a semester-long English course. The findings indicate that fixed group structures fostered the students' engagement, responsibility, and teamwork skills. Based on the results, the study offers practical recommendations for organizing and sustaining effective group work in English language classrooms to enhance student participation and learning outcomes.

Keywords: Group work, classroom activities, enhance, English lessons

Introduction

Group work activities have been widely applied in classroom lessons, offering the undeniable benefits of enhancing students' academic performance and developing their soft skills. Specifically, group work has been proven to foster team collaboration, increase learning autonomy, and improve students' intrinsic motivation. These benefits make group work a valuable strategy in modern educational settings, especially in language learning classrooms where interaction and communication are mainly oriented.

However, the success of group work activities is not guaranteed solely by their implementation. Various factors influence its effectiveness, including the teacher's role, students' engagement, students' learning autonomy, the relevance of group work tasks, and the students' English

proficiency level (Homayouni, 2022; Tanaka, 2022; Ulla & Perales, 2021). As the teacher plays the roles of designer, organizer, and facilitator of group activities, the teacher can determine the level of students' engagement, interaction, and communication in English learning activities. Without careful planning and continuous management, group work can result in unequal participation, dissatisfaction, and missed learning opportunities (Awuor, 2022; Zhang et al., 2022).

With the aim of exploring the effectiveness of different ways to organize group work activities in the English course, this paper introduces a structured method for organizing group work settings in English language learning classrooms. This method involves assigning students to fixed groups for the entire 10-week semester and establishing group working regulations from the outset. This group work implementation has been applied by researchers many times and has consistently shown positive results. To further explore its effectiveness, a qualitative study was conducted, involving interviews with nine students and two teachers following a semester-long implementation of group-work activities in an English course.

Literature Review

Group work

Group work is commonly known as a teaching approach that facilitates collaboration among students in a classroom environment to achieve their learning objectives (Wilson et al., 2018). Group work activities typically involve a number of students working together in small teams, usually with more than two members, to complete a given task by exchanging their opinions and sharing their knowledge. This will provide opportunities for students to communicate, interact, practice, and promote their language competences, together with other skills. Collaborative learning was described as a dynamic and interactive process that promotes not only communication competence (Johnson & Johnson, 1991) but also critical thinking and learner autonomy (Bui & Nguyen, 2024).

Although the term "group work" has been defined in a number of ways, this paper will employ Johnson's (2005) definition, which states that group learning is a teaching strategy in which students of various skill levels work in small groups to complete tasks that will ultimately improve their comprehension of the subject. Each student is in charge of both their own education and the education of the other students in the group. Students collaborate to complete the assignment effectively. Other research has revealed numerous benefits to working in groups (Wenjing, 2011; Hanan & Nowreyah, 2014).

Benefits of Group Work in Language Learning

Group work has consistently demonstrated positive effects on language learning outcomes in international contexts. Wang (2023) employed the Jigsaw Cooperative Learning model and found that EFL students significantly improved their academic motivation, resilience, and self-efficacy in collaborative tasks.

Moreover, Liu et al. (2024) reported in their systematic review of cooperative learning in higher education that students would improve their English language competence, classroom engagement, and critical thinking skills by working in groups. These studies suggest that well-structured group work environments not only foster language acquisition but also promote essential soft skills, such as self-efficacy and accountability, which are crucial for long-term academic success. Nonetheless, group work was reported to improve students' interactions in English classroom environment better than other pedagogical methods. Students could share

their views and engagement in speaking activities in their English lessons when working in groups (Jeon et al., 2024).

One of the major benefits of group work activities is that they support students in improving their critical thinking and problem-solving skills. When students work in groups to complete tasks, they encounter diverse perspectives, which encourage their deeper analysis and foster more critical thinking, along with broader views (Gillies, 2023). Meanwhile, Keiler (2018) confirmed that this collaborative approach resulted in higher-order thinking, as students were obligatory to justify their ideas and confront contradictions.

In Vietnam, several previous studies have validated the effectiveness of group work activities in enhancing English learning outcomes across diverse academic settings. Le and Nguyen (2017) emphasized that consistent group interaction significantly increased students' responsibility and engagement, although group work activities would be more challenging due to mixed ability levels and the use of Vietnamese language in English classrooms. This result supports Do and Le (2019), who shared that group work enhances stronger affective engagement and peer learning, although challenges such as unequal participation and dominant members persist. In another study, Phan (2024) reported notable benefits in speaking fluency and confidence among non-English majors at a technical university following a semester-long implementation of fixed group tasks. Moreover, these findings affirmed that group work not only facilitates language skill development but also encourages social cohesion and learner autonomy in the Vietnamese tertiary EFL context.

However, group work activities were reviewed, and some unavoidable challenges were identified. One of the most commonly challenging issues is the unequal participation among group members, where stronger students often dominate while weaker ones remain passive, reducing the effectiveness of collaborative learning (Do & Le, 2019). Additionally, conflicts within groups, such as those stemming from differences in personalities, learning styles, or language proficiency levels, can hinder group cohesion and learning outcomes (Le & Nguyen, 2017). Time management and over-reliance on the first language are also recurring concerns; students often switch to their native language for convenience, limiting opportunities for English practice (Phan, 2024). From the teacher's perspective, facilitating multiple groups simultaneously, ensuring fair assessment, and keeping learners accountable pose significant challenges in terms of workload and classroom management (Zhang et al., 2022). Furthermore, cultural attitudes toward individual achievement over collaboration may discourage students from fully engaging in group work, particularly in exam-oriented educational contexts such as Vietnam (Tran & Nguyen, 2021).

Learning Autonomy

The concept of learner autonomy has emerged as a pivotal factor influencing the efficacy of language learning, particularly in collaborative settings such as group work. This notion of learner autonomy encompasses not only the capacity for self-directed learning but also active engagement in collaborative environments that foster critical thinking and interpersonal skills.

The intersection of autonomy and group work highlights the importance of social dynamics in language learning. It has been established that collaborative tasks can foster a supportive peer culture that encourages learners to take risks and experiment with language use (Egitim, 2025). Such environments not only promote language acquisition but also cultivate essential interdependent skills, as learners must negotiate roles and responsibilities to function effectively as a group (Zhang et al., 2022). Learners are considered capable of determining their own learning objectives, appropriate content, progression, and selecting proper methods and suitable

techniques to use during their learning process (Cotterall, 2000; Pham, 2023). This explanation seems to be better understood by Smith (2007), who states that learner autonomy is activated when learners have the power and right to learn for themselves (p. 2).

Moreover, in the context of learning English, teachers and researchers have demonstrated their interest in identifying factors that facilitate language learning (Sato, 2022; Pham, 2023). Learner autonomy, indicated in learner reflection and taking responsibility, has become a crucial concern in language teaching and learning (Little, 2022; Ly, 2024; Nguyen et al., 2024). According to Nguyen et al. (2024), learning autonomy is one of the key factors influencing learning outcomes. Students are determined to be responsible and autonomous for their own learning process.

Zhang et al. (2022) demonstrated that group work tasks can both foster students' learner autonomy and expose students to the complexities of group dynamics. Furthermore, recent studies by Chowdhury (2021) and Dahal et al. (2022) have emphasized that group work facilitation enhances learner autonomy and task achievement significantly in an English learning context.

Teacher and students' roles in group work

Teachers and students are both key stakeholders involved in groupwork activities in the classroom. The teacher's role is emphasized as a facilitator, guiding the implementation of group work. They also need to maintain a balance between independent and scaffolding activities (Keiler, 2018). According to MacAllister (2025), teachers are not only knowledge deliverers; their strategic interjections and support can significantly impact group outcomes by setting clear expectations and fostering their learning environment. Conversely, students are increasingly recognized not just as passive participants but as active contributors to their learning processes, responsible for negotiating tasks and facilitating peer relationships (Silva et al., 2021). This shift in perspective, from viewing students as receptacles of knowledge to seeing them as co-creators of their educational experiences, is pivotal in understanding the collaborative process in group work.

In addition, Roberson and Franchini (2014) reported that group work is only effectively implemented when students are aware of its role in serving the stated learning goals and disciplinary thinking goals of the course. Meanwhile, the teachers play the roles of facilitators, supervisors, recorders, reporters, harmonizers, innovators, and checkers in the chain of group work activities for the entire course (Barkley, Cross, & Major, 2005).

The teacher's role in the classroom is significant when implementing group work activities. Studies by Chowdhury (2021) and Bui and Nguyen (2024) demonstrate that teachers who facilitate group interactions effectively can significantly influence the group's overall success, as their strategies often shape student perceptions of group work. This aligns with the research of Pedersen, S., & Liu, M. (2003), which confirmed that the teacher's flexibility is a factor in the effectiveness of group-work implementation. Moreover, Rohmah et al. (2023) and Leslie (2018) articulate that effective teacher facilitation can enhance collaboration and engagement, illustrating the critical influence of teacher interventions on group dynamics.

The students' roles in the group-working procedure would be essential, specifically in their leadership and friendship among group members. For instance, MacAllister (2025) and Silva et al. (2021) reveal that clearly defined roles among students can lead to improved performance, suggesting that role allocation is essential for optimizing group work. In a design-based study by Bao and Pham (2021), the findings showed that students agreed on the effectiveness of group work in a friend-related group with their appointed leaders compared to mixed-ability groups

with unfamiliar classmates.

The students' roles in group work activities have been investigated significantly beyond the academic achievement, to the social and emotional dimensions of learning (Huang & Lajoie, 2023). The students' performance has been demonstrated in various roles, including leader, mediator, and contributor. All of these roles can significantly affect the collaborative experience and the level of individual accountability that participants feel (Zitha et al., 2023). Furthermore, recognizing and explicating students' roles leads to more strategic group formations that account for individual strengths, weaknesses, and varying levels of engagement in classroom activities (Barkley et al., 2005).

With all the significant benefits of group work activities mentioned, the students and teachers at this technical university still do not find the implementation of group work in their own English lessons to be effective and satisfactory. Therefore, this paper aims to investigate an alternative approach to designing group work activities consecutively across all lessons in an EFL course. This research is aimed to answer the two research questions below:

1. How were group work activities implemented consecutively in the English course?

2. What are the students' and teachers' feedback on this implementation?

Methods

Pedagogical Setting & Participants

To explore the effectiveness of consecutive group work activities in English learning lessons, a different group work tool was introduced and implemented in the researchers' EFL classes at a technical university in Vietnam. The participants comprised 68 technical students, who are currently learning English for their technical occupational purposes. They are the second-year students majoring in Electrical and Electronics Engineering. Their ages ranges from 19-21 years old. Seven of nine interviewed students are boys and only two are girls. Their English level is assumed to be at A2 level. They are learning the course English for Electrical and Electronics Engineering 4. This course is provided for second-year students majoring in Electrical and Electronics Engineering. It was established with English for Occupational Purposes and delivered in a blended format (35 periods of online learning, including vocabulary, grammar, listening, reading, and writing practice, together with 40 face-to-face periods concentrating on speaking skills). They have learned English for three semesters of 225 periods before joining this English course, so their English level is expected to be at the A2 level. They were guided and instructed to work continuously in one group for the whole English course in ten weeks.

The teachers involved in the research were two of the author's colleagues, who taught the same English course program at the same time. They shared the methods for implementing and controlling group work during the course.

Implementation procedure

Consequently, three stages of consecutive group work approach were established. First, the teacher instructed the students to work in groups for the entire semester, and then asked them to divide themselves into groups of four to six students, depending on the number of students. In our classroom context, with 30-35 students, the number of groups usually ranges from 5 to 7, with 4-5 students per group. This division was believed to be suitable and it would enhance students' roles in the group.

The second stage involved establishing discipline rules for group work performances, in which

the teacher and students discussed and decided on the rules for bonuses and fines for every group work activity. This would encourage the students to work actively and responsibly in groups. The final stage is to implement group work in all classroom activities and adhere to the rules for the entire course.

Group work disciplines

The teacher is usually the person who sets the rules for the classroom. However, for this particular classroom, both teacher and students are required to establish rules for group work actions altogether. The rules, then, must be in written form and announced to the whole class so that students can figure out what to do for themselves. Setting the rules independently will make students more responsible for their roles and duties in group work. The students discussed and set rules regarding members' attendance, homework completion, private conversations in the Vietnamese language, mobile phone use, and task fulfillment. The scores for each action range from 5 to 100, depending on the complexity level of the tasks. In fact, these activities could become task-based, allowing each group to earn competitive points. Accordingly, for each response the group would receive 20 points. These types of tasks require the cooperative contributions and responses from all students in the group to achieve success and competitive environment among groups in the class.

Data collection and analysis

After applying the grouping technique, where students were assigned to one group at the beginning of the semester and remained in the same group for all English lessons, data were collected through in-depth interviews. The participants included nine university students and two English language teachers who had implemented and experienced the group-work model.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted at the end of the semester to gather insights into participants' experiences, perceptions, and evaluations of the group-work process. Interview questions focused on students' engagement, collaboration, learning outcomes, and the challenges or advantages of working in fixed groups over time. The collected data were analyzed using content analysis to identify recurring themes and patterns related to student participation, group dynamics, and the teacher's role in facilitating group-work.

The qualitative nature of the study enabled a deeper understanding of how group work functions in real classroom settings and provided practical implications for improving group work strategies in English language teaching. The findings served as the basis for developing recommendations aimed at enhancing student involvement and learning effectiveness in group-based activities.

Results/Findings

The students' feedback on the continuous groupwork implementation

The findings from the interviews revealed several key themes related to the effectiveness of using fixed groups throughout the semester in English language classrooms. Overall, both students reported positive experiences, noting improvements in group cohesion, student participation, and learning motivation. The interview data were interpreted qualitatively to uncover underlying themes related to student motivation, responsibility, and engagement.

Students' attitudes towards group-work activity model

Almost all of students expressed their positive attitudes toward the group-work activity model. Many of them indicated that they enjoyed this form of collaborative learning, with many noting

that it enabled them to develop not only their English proficiency but also a range of transferable skills such as communication, teamwork, and time management. This suggested that students perceived group-work as a holistic learning experience rather than one limited to linguistic outcomes. Student #2 reported that

> "*I really like working in groups in my English course. It is completely different from what we have studied before. I enjoy collaborating with my team to complete all the tasks assigned by my teachers. My teammates are very engaged and united so we can earn more scores from our teachers' activities…*"

Students' engagements

Significantly, most participants agreed that their groupwork experiences in the English course increased their sense of responsibility substantially. Students described a heightened awareness of their individual contributions, as well as a collective commitment to achieving shared goals. As Student #7 shared

> "*At first, most of my teammates didn't care about the regulations of groupwork performance. However, after two lessons with many minus scores due to homework incompletion and late attendance, they became more responsible for their roles within the team. They changed their awareness and follow the rules much better…*"

Additionally, some of students felt that working consistently within the same groups introduced a healthy sense of competition, motivating them to perform better in English tasks. For instance, Student #9 reported that

> "*Well, I really like my teammates. At first, we knew little about each other, but after participating in some group work activities, we got to know each other better. And then, we can share not only our study but also our student life every time we learn English together…*"

Students' challenges

While this competitiveness was generally viewed as positive, some students noted that it occasionally led to stress or pressure, suggesting the need for balanced group expectations and emotional support from instructors.

> "*The English course this semester was very difficult and stressful to me. I had to follow a lot of regulations, which made me under pressure to study English. I had to complete all the homework or my team would lose our score. I couldn't find any spare time for relaxation, as we had to participate in all activities in groups for the entire time. However, I learnt a lot about the discipline and responsibility in teamwork performance.*"

(confessed by Student #6)

Furthermore, most students showed their willingness to continue working in their fixed groups in future English courses. This finding reflects a sense of continuity and satisfaction, indicating the potential for the long-term integration of group work into language curricula. However, the respondence also revealed concerns about group imbalances and the need for clearer role assignments, indicating that sustained motivation requires ongoing teacher facilitation and adjustment.

> "*I think groupwork was very good for us to be more confident in learning and practicing our English skills. However, I sometimes found that my teacher missed counting the scores of some activities, which led to our demotivation and lack of motivation in the next*

activities. As a result, we usually lost our scores for other groups due to our under attention…"

noted by Student #5.

The teachers' feedback on the continuous groupwork implementation

Teachers' attitudes

According to two interviewed teachers, they expressed their satisfaction and positive attitudes towards implementing consecutive groupwork activities in their classrooms. Teacher #1 shared that

"I found this groupwork implementation so great and useful for my English class. The teacher no longer cared about the noise and private talks in the class during the lesson. Once the teacher gave the instructions for the activities, the groups followed right immediately. The teacher just walked around and guided students to complete their tasks."

She also mentioned the benefits of this grouping approach that

"I did not worry about the students' homework because after some reminding times, the group members would remind their partners for homework completion. I realized that my students became more active, engaged in the lessons and practicing their English skills, surprisingly more responsible for their study and teamwork performance."

The Teacher #2 eagerly told that

"Since I applied this groupwork style for the whole course, the most favourite but challenging task is summing the scores for my students' teamwork. Other classroom activities seemed to be implemented in a more straightforward and enjoyable manner. I found this groupwork performance so practical and beneficial to learning style and learning autonomy…"

Teachers' feedback on students' engagement

Overall, the findings point to a shift in classroom dynamics, where both teachers and students are more actively engaged in the learning process. For teachers, the implementation of structured group work implies a redefinition of their roles - not only as knowledge transmitters but also as facilitators of collaboration. To sustain these positive outcomes, educators are encouraged to invest in thoughtful group design, continuous monitoring, and responsive adjustments based on student feedback and group performance.

However, the findings show that the group work experience has significantly impacted the students' attitude toward learning English. Furthermore, it has been seen that this pedagogical approach facilitates improved interactions between group members.

Last but not least, the consistent use of group work in EFL courses has revealed how well the group work approach supports and improves students' engagement in English classes. This useful method fosters a friendly learning community where students can share their thoughts and concerns about studying English with other group members collaboratively and competitively. Additionally, it fosters teamwork skills as well as English proficiency, which helps students gain more valuable group work experience.

Discussion

These findings align with previous studies that have proved the pedagogical value of collaborative learning models in language teaching and learning. For instance, Johnson et al (1998) investigated that cooperative learning enhances not only academic achievement but also interpersonal and social skills. Similarly, the interviewed students in this study reported improvement in communication, teamwork, and time management.

One salient theme emerging from the data of this research is students' increased sense of responsibility and effort over their groupwork learning tasks. This finding is consistent with the study by Dörnyei and Murphey (2003), who emphasize the role of group dynamics in sustaining motivation and fostering learner autonomy. As mentioned in the findings, the fixed group format prompted accountability, especially as peer pressure and group expectations in incentivized timely homework completion and regular participation. These outcomes align with Slavin's (1996) claim that group interdependence is a crucial factor in pushing student effort and academic outcomes. Similar observations have been made in recent studies on gamified cooperative learning (Lee & Lai, 2024), which highlight how structured, reward-based systems keep learners engaged and accountable over multiple sessions.

The findings of this study are consistent with those of Dörnyei and Murphey (2003), supporting the notion that stable group membership can strengthen learner motivation by creating a sense of belonging and fostering peer accountability. However, the significance of this study lies in its further exploration of how motivation evolves over time, particularly when combined with performance-based scoring systems and teacher monitoring.

While Johnson et al. (1998) and Gillies (2016) have emphasized the academic and social benefits of cooperative learning, this study extends their findings by documenting students' perceptions of acquiring time management and team discipline skills, which attributes less commonly detailed in prior research.

The present study contributes to this gap by documenting student-reported improvements in time management, task delegation, and discipline—skills increasingly emphasized in recent Asian research. In this sense, group work not only facilitated language learning but also served as a platform for practicing workplace-relevant soft skills, a dimension underrepresented in earlier cooperative learning literature.

Conclusion

The findings from this study highlight the significant pedagogical value of implementing consecutive group work throughout an English language course. Both students and teachers reported their enhancements in participation, motivation, and responsibility as a result of consistent group work performances. Students not only developed their English language proficiency but also improved essential soft skills, including teamwork, time management, and interpersonal communication. Importantly, the group work model encouraged a sense of shared accountability, mutual support, and healthy competition, all of which contributed to a more engaging and dynamic learning environment. However, the research also revealed some challenges, such as unequal participation, group imbalances, and stress due to continuous assessment, which emphasized the need for thoughtful teacher facilitation and ongoing monitoring.

Overall, this study reinforces the potential of group work as a powerful instructional strategy in English teaching, especially when implemented with clear expectations, supportive structures,

and responsive pedagogical adjustments. Despite its promising findings, this study was limited by issues of unequal participation and group imbalances, which may have affected the consistency of learning outcomes across students. Additionally, the stress induced by continuous group assessments may have overshadowed the engagement or motivation of some learners. These challenges suggest that while consecutive group work holds great pedagogical value, its effectiveness is highly dependent on careful facilitation and ongoing teacher intervention. It is recommended that future research further explore the long-term effects of group work on learner autonomy and performance across diverse educational settings.

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