

Matches and Mismatches in Perceptions of Group Work: Voices from EFL Teachers and Students

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Abstract

Although group work activities are commonly employed in communicative second language (L2) classes, there are few studies that investigate how much teachers and students, the two main stakeholders, agree or differ on how group work activities should be conducted. To fill this gap, this study, which was carried out at a public university in Vietnam, examined the perceptions of both teachers and students to uncover matches and mismatches in their perceptions of important issues for effective group work implementation. The study explored the actual experiences of six teachers and ten students, who were chosen by convenience sampling. Thematic analysis of the interviews indicated that the benefits of group work were widely agreed upon, as were the preferences for group size and self-selection of group members. However, there was disagreement over ways of grouping, the role of leadership, and the use of peer assessment. The findings have significant implications for relevant stakeholders, especially in the Asian English as a foreign language (EFL) context, about what would work well and what needs to be addressed to maximize the effectiveness of group work implementation.

Keywords: Group work, Matches, Mismatches, EFL, Vietnamese teacher and student perceptions

Group work has become a common practice in today's communicative second language (L2) classroom. Supported by Long's (1996) interaction hypothesis and Swain's (2005) output hypothesis, group work is claimed to provide opportunities for language acquisition, consolidation of known language, and metalinguistic discussion. Recognized as a valuable activity in English language learning (Willis & Willis, 2007) and general education (Johnson

et al., 2013), group work not only fosters language learning, but it also enhances motivation and improves students' social skills (Johnson et al., 2013). Back in the 1990s, when methods for communicative language teaching gained popularity in Asia, group work in language classrooms was encouraged. However, such methods have occasionally been criticized as an imported Western teaching strategy (Ellis, 1996), leading to requests for culturally sensitive strategies in Asian contexts (Lewis & McCook, 2002; McKay, 2003). Recent research in the implementation of group work has indicated that there is still no easy way to implement it successfully in L2 classrooms in both Western and Asian contexts (Chen & Hird, 2006; Hiromori et al., 2021; Hoang & de Nooy, 2020). Teachers and students experiencing group work implementation have expressed a variety of organizational and instructional concerns. As an example, our own experience shows that when it comes to implementing group work activities, it is usually the teacher who decides on group size and group formation. However, as Gillies and Boyle (2010) and Poort et al. (2022) noted, whether students have a voice in who they cooperate with is likely to have an impact on their degree of engagement and group work success. Despite friendship groups being perceived to produce better learning outcomes than random or ability groupings (Chiriac & Granström, 2012; Pham & Renshaw, 2015), friendship within the group could occasionally prevent students from working seriously, developing strong arguments, and enhancing cognitive engagement (Le et al., 2018). This example illustrates that even small changes or disagreements in organizational conditions, such as the selection of group members, can have a significant impact on how effectively group work is implemented (Ghanbari & Abdolrezapour, 2020). Furthermore, reaching an agreement on several other pedagogical issues related to group work implementation, like group size, the role of leadership, and the use of peer assessment, may prove difficult. While some perceptions may align, facilitating smoother implementation, mismatches can lead to challenges that hinder collaborative learning. This study seeks to investigate these perceptual matches and mismatches, particularly in Vietnamese EFL classrooms, to develop more effective group work strategies that can meet the needs and expectations of both teachers and students.

Literature review

Group work is a fundamental component of cooperative learning. Cooperative learning refers to the instructional use of small groups to promote students working together to maximize their own and each other's learning (Johnson et al., 2013). Learning through a collective environment was basically supported by the Sociocultural Theory derived from the work of psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1978) who believed that learning has its basis in interacting with other people. From this perspective, language learning is viewed as a process that an expert and a novice (learner) socially co-construct. The learner internalizes the support received from the expert, which eventually enables him/her to work independently. But for learning to take place, the assistance must be graded and properly catered to the learner's needs (i.e., scaffolded) and abilities. In the classroom, teachers usually provide this assistance, but research shows that peers can also effectively support each other when working in pairs or small groups, and such support can facilitate learning (Donato, 1994; Storch, 2002).

The aforementioned insights have significantly informed research into student and teacher perceptions of group work. This research has reported findings that confirm the benefits of group work for fostering development and motivation in language learning (Do & Le, 2020; Dobao & Blum, 2013; Ghanbari & Abdolrezapour, 2020; Poupore, 2016; Villarreal & Munarriz-Ibarrola, 2021; Wang, 2021) and more generally (Le et al., 2018; Gillies & Boyle,

2010; Wong et al., 2022). For example, Gillies and Boyle (2010) reported reflections from ten teachers in schools in Australia. Results indicated that the teachers had positive experiences with implementing group work. They noted that the students responded well to their small group experiences and that it helped them better manage and structure the lessons. In the L2 classroom, Do and Le (2020) investigated high school teachers' perceptions of the implementation of group work in English-speaking classes in Vietnam. Results from a survey and classroom observations showed that most teachers fully understood the importance of group work in speaking classes. They perceived that group work provided students with opportunities to use English communicatively, learn from peers, and reduced stress. At the same time, group work research has identified various factors influencing the effectiveness of group work implementation, including group size, group formation, leadership roles, and peer assessment in group work, all of which will be discussed below.

Group size

One of the major factors determining the success or otherwise of group work concerns group size. There is a consensus among teachers and students that a small group size of three to five members is ideal, as reported in studies in various contexts (e.g., Chiriac & Granström, 2012; Gillies & Boyle, 2010; Lou et al., 1996). Chiriac and Granström (2012) found that school students in Sweden perceived that a group of three people was the ideal size and that more than six people was a hindrance to effective group work. Teachers in Australian schools in Gillies and Boyle's (2010) study indicated that groups of four instead of groups of six worked brilliantly.

Group formation

In terms of group formation, there is little consensus regarding how to construct groups so that students work well together. Ghanbari and Abdolrezapour (2020) explored the perceptions of EFL adult learners of different ability levels who were involved in either homogeneous or heterogeneous groups. Results indicated that while most students had favorable opinions of group work, they had varying opinions of the grouping they were assigned to. The same-ability grouping was well received by both high achievers and average achievers because they felt it was a fair and cooperative practice. Low-achieving students did, however, show dissatisfaction with both types of grouping. They stated that they still needed the teacher's assistance and encountered behavioral conflicts. Furthermore, prior studies (Chapman et al., 2006; Pham & Gillies, 2010; Wang, 2021) have demonstrated that group formation by self-selection positively impacts students' attitudes and success in group work. Chapman et al. (2006) found that students who were able to select their own group members viewed the group process as being more beneficial and successful than students who were placed in groups at random. Pham and Gillies (2010) further reported students' voices regarding friendship groups. Findings showed that students prioritized solidarity over other cognitive factors when forming their groups. They had negative attitudes towards heterogeneous groups and preferred to work harmoniously with friends. Recent research (Le et al. 2018; Poort et al. 2022) has also pointed out that self-selected groups tend to be homogeneous. This resulted in a lack of diversity of perspectives and low cognitive engagement.

Role of leadership in groupwork

Regarding the role of leadership, studies in the Japanese EFL context have shed light on the role of leadership in group interaction (e.g., Leeming, 2019; Hiromori et al., 2021; Yashima et

al., 2016). Studies by Leeming (2019) and Yashima et al. (2016) on naturally occurring emergent leadership emphasized the importance of a leader-role student in group work. Yashima et al. (2016) found that groups with emergent leaders were more successful, whereas those without leaders were more likely to encounter problems during discussions. Leeming (2019) concluded that the presence or absence of leadership strongly predicted the level of participation in conversations. Hiromori et al. (2021) investigated whether leadership roles could be deliberately assigned to students in group work activities. Their results suggest that assigning leaders can facilitate a smooth start to interactions among members and maintain a consistently high level of motivation throughout the task. Taken together, the results confirm the positive impact of leadership on group work, indicating that leadership, whether emergent or assigned, is a significant factor determining success or failure of group activities. It is, however, important to note that these studies primarily rely on classroom interaction data and do not incorporate the perspectives of either teachers or students.

Peer assessment in groupwork

The number of peer assessment research studies has recently increased and has revealed voices from teachers and students that supported peer assessment as being a reliable and valid way of assessing individual performances in L2 settings (Li et al., 2022; Saito & Fujita, 2009; Weaver & Esposto, 2012). For example, Saito and Fujita (2009) examined the use of peer assessment for discriminating among group members' contributions to group presentations in college EFL classrooms. The descriptive statistics of intra-group peer assessment revealed that intra-group peer assessment could distinguish individual contributions to the group product. The results suggest that peer assessment allowed teachers to include assessment of individual contributions to group tasks in students' grades, as well as facilitating students' cooperation on group tasks. Similarly, Li et al. (2022) reported positive perceptions of teachers and students regarding peer assessment in Chinese college English-speaking classrooms. They found that peer assessment was beneficial for assessment receivers and peer assessors. Therefore, these studies support the use of peer assessment as an effective means of assessing peer performance, but little research has compared the perceptions of teachers and students regarding this important instructional issue.

This review of the literature indicates that much research until now has investigated experiences and perceptions of various factors concerning group work implementation from the perspectives of only one group of actors, either students or teachers. These studies have mostly concentrated on student perspectives (e.g., Dobao & Blum, 2013; Ghanbari & Abdolrezapour, 2020), with relatively few studies addressing teacher perspectives in either general education (e.g., Gillies & Boyle, 2010) or L2 classrooms (e.g., Do & Le, 2020). Research investigating perspectives on group work implementation from both teachers and students in the same learning context is limited. Notably, Le et al. (2018) carried out a pioneering study that explored the perspectives of both teachers and students at a pre-service teacher education faculty at a university in Vietnam regarding collaborative learning (CL). Specifically, the study explored obstacles to effective student collaboration in groups and found four obstacles, namely students' lack of collaborative skills, free-riding, competence status, and friendship. This research has shed light on the shared perspectives of teachers and students on key factors affecting group work. However, it did not thoroughly examine the views of teachers and their students regarding other crucial implementation issues such as group size, group formation, the role of leadership, and the use of peer assessment, especially in EFL

classrooms. These implementation issues are particularly important in an Asian EFL context, where cultural factors – influenced by a Confucian heritage that prioritizes collectivism (Hofstede, 1986) – play a significant role. Students in collectivist cultures tend to prioritize group needs and harmony over personal achievement (Xiao, 2006). Understanding these culturally sensitive issues is important for developing effective group work strategies that accommodate both teacher and student preferences in Asian EFL contexts.

The present study

The present study builds upon previous research on group work implementation by addressing two key areas. First, it investigates implementation issues from the perspectives of both students and teachers within the same learning context. Second, it examines a wider range of critical implementation issues from these key stakeholders' perspectives. Prior studies have typically focused on the perceptions of either teachers or students, with the exception of Le et al. (2018), who included both groups but primarily concentrated on an integrated understanding of the obstacles to effective group work implementation. This study seeks to address this gap. It aims to provide a more nuanced understanding by investigating both teachers' and students' perceptions to identify matches and mismatches regarding crucial issues related to group work implementation such as group size, group formation, leadership roles, and the use of peer assessment. Conducted at a large public university in the south of Vietnam, this research is particularly relevant in an Asian EFL context where group work has gained favor (Phuong-Mai et al., 2012) but remains challenging to implement effectively (Le et al., 2018).

The study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What matches exist between teachers' and students' perceptions of effective group work implementation in the EFL classrooms studied?
2. What mismatches exist between teachers' and students' perceptions of effective group work implementation in the EFL classrooms studied?

Methodology

Research design and setting

The current study is a follow-up to a larger study which explored the implementation of group work across the two bachelor's degree programs in English language and English language teacher education at the Faculty of Foreign Languages of a large public university in the South of Vietnam (Nguyen & Bui, 2023). This study, which employed a survey, classroom observations, and student interviews as data collection tools, had identified significant implementation issues related to benefits of group work, group formation, group size, the role of leadership, and the use of peer assessment. The issues identified in the larger study served as the impetus for the current study, which adopts the exploratory-descriptive qualitative research design (Hunter et al., 2019). This study delves into the relatively understudied phenomenon of matches and mismatches in the perceptions of effective group work implementation among students and teachers in L2 classrooms. This research design is applied to improve understanding of the people or things involved, their roles, and the spatial environment in which the events occurred (Hunter et al., 2019). In this study, the focus is on exploring matches and mismatches in perceptions related to group work implementation as a phenomenon. This exploration is conducted through the perspectives of Vietnamese university EFL teachers and students, utilizing a semi-structured individual interview.

Participants

Convenience sampling was used to select both teacher and student participants based on their willingness to participate (Creswell, 2012). An invitation was sent to 20 teachers at the same university who had relatively rich experiences utilizing small group activities in their classrooms. Six of the teachers (5 females, 1 male) (T1 to T6) replied, and all volunteered to participate. Four had MA degrees and two had PhD degrees in TESOL and Applied Linguistics, and they had teaching experience ranging from 18 to 22 years. They all had taught a variety of English language skills and specialization courses across the two programs (i.e., English language and English teacher education). Student participants were drawn among those who participated in the larger study. At the time of this larger study, a total of 1142 students enrolled in the two programs at the university. A pool of 297 students completed a questionnaire for the larger study and 15 students indicated their willingness to participate in a semi-structured interview for the larger study through an invitation included in the questionnaire. To ensure a relatively balanced number of participants from all four cohorts across the two programs, only ten students were selected. These ten students were reinvited for a follow-up in-depth interview for the current study. All agreed to participate. As in the larger study, two students (S1, S2) were in the first year of the programs, three students (S3, S4, S5) in the second year, three students (S6, S7, S8) in the third year, and two students (S9, S10) in the fourth year. The level of the courses increased year by year, going from pre-intermediate in Year 1 to advanced in Year 4 (A2 to C1, Common European Framework of Reference for Languages). Students were tested on English language proficiency in the university entrance exam and had to obtain a minimum standard to enter the two English programs. They were then required to pass end-of-term exams throughout the course in order to progress to the next level. While these exams acted as gatekeepers, ensuring a minimum level of proficiency among students at each course level, classes were nevertheless quite mixed in language level. Some students had a high level of proficiency, while others met only the minimum entry requirements for the course level. They were aged from 18 to 21. In the convenience sampling, we purposefully recruited students from a variety of learning environments to represent a broad spectrum of group work experiences. However, we were not able to achieve gender balance to ensure diverse perspectives due to the scarcity of male teachers and students within the two programs. All participants were briefed about the study's aims and methods, and all signed informed consent forms.

Data collection

Teachers and students were interviewed separately using a semi-structured interview protocol. A semi-structured interview was chosen as a data collection strategy to examine the perceptions of both teachers and students in a flexible manner which could allow the interviewer to delve deeper into participants' responses to elicit a rich data set (Dörnyei, 2007). Main interview themes included key implementation issues identified in the larger study: 1) perceptions of group work implementation; 2) organization conditions such as group formation, group size, and selection of group members; 3) the role of leadership; and (4) the use of peer assessment (see Appendix A for a list of interview questions for teachers and students). Each interview with both the students and the teachers lasted approximately 50 minutes. All interviews were conducted face-to-face and in Vietnamese. The oral answers were recorded with the agreement of the participants.

Data coding and analysis

Content-based analyses of the interview data were used to identify common themes following an inductive approach (Glaser & Strauss, 2012). The thematic analysis of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006) followed two steps. The first step involved the coding of teacher and student transcription sets. Each author read each set repeatedly to identify ideas that were shared among the teachers and the students in each set. Then, the two authors discussed differences and similarities in the identified major and sub-themes. During the discussion, we regrouped (e.g., merging, splitting, and rearranging) the coded themes and resolved differences until the two coders reached a consensus on the final themes and sub-themes. Labels of themes and sub-themes were repeatedly discussed and revised. The second step involved the triangulation of the two data sets to identify the common themes. The identified themes that were commonly shared among teachers and students were presented according to the research questions (i.e., matches and mismatches in the teachers and students' perceptions of major issues in the implementation of group work activities).

The data analysis process exhibits validity by adopting a systematic and transparent approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The iterative process of discussing and revising theme labels enhances reliability. Triangulation, involving data from both teachers and students in the same learning context, bolsters validity by identifying common themes. This rigorous methodology ensures the credibility and robustness of the study's findings.

Results

Matches between students' and teachers' perceptions.

Perceptions of benefits of group work. The interview data revealed an overall positive attitude towards group work among teachers and students. All the teacher participants commented that they had positive experiences with group work implementation. They appreciated the benefits of group collaboration, acknowledging that it provides students with ample opportunities to learn from each other, practice various language skills, and receive linguistic support from their peers. As T5 and T3 said:

When students work together, they can help each other learn. A student who knows more can explain things to the group. When everyone has a task to do, it encourages everyone to participate or to communicate in English. If someone gets stuck, their peers can provide timely assistance by offering help with expressions or finding the right words to express ideas. (T5)

In my writing class, I have noticed that my students are more comfortable writing in groups than they are working alone. They discuss to come up with ideas before assigning each member a task. They can each turn to the other for assistance while they are working on their own. Then, they provide feedback to one another. This process not only improves writing skills but also teaches students to provide constructive feedback. (T3)

Moreover, three teachers further noted the development of students' sense of discipline and responsibility. They explained that working collaboratively results in learners promoting each other's success. When students know that their peers are relying on them, they will be more motivated and try to discipline themselves to complete the assigned task. As T2 stated:

I usually outline specific activities with clear objectives for a group task and let students decide who does what in the group. As I have observed, when students know others are counting on them, they work more responsibly. This promotes self-discipline as everyone needs to stay disciplined and do their best to achieve a good score. (T2)

Similarly, all the students expressed a positive attitude towards group learning. They mentioned that group work used in their classes offered them opportunities to improve their communication skills and build up their confidence. The following two extracts are representative:

I can practice my communication skills when working with peers. I learn to express my ideas clearly and listen to peers. When my ideas are appreciated, I feel more confident and motivated to try. (S2)

I feel that I work more confidently with peers in groups, especially with friendly and supportive peers. I can ask for help and do not feel pressure if I make mistakes. Talking with the teacher or speaking English in front of class scares me. (S7)

Five of the students further provided more specific benefits of group work. They shared with the teachers the idea that group work activities provided them with ample opportunities to practice English language skills, especially speaking skills. They also noted the value of peer assistance. As S3 and S4 said:

Group work activities give me more language practice opportunities. I get to talk more [in English] than I do during a whole class activity. Besides, when I make pronunciation or grammar mistakes, my group-mates can recognize them and help me correct them. (S3)

Speaking in groups gives me more opportunities to speak English with my friends as we hardly have time to speak English outside of class. Also, I can express my opinions more freely when I talk with peers than with the teacher or with the whole class. (S4)

The overall results suggested that the teachers and students were in agreement on the benefits of group work for language learning. In addition to this match, they shared their views on the way group members should be selected and the number of members should make up a group, as presented below.

Self-selection of group members. All six teachers reported preferences for their students to self-select group members. They underscored the importance of maturity and self-responsibility. As T1 and T4 stated:

Since I believe my students are old enough to make their own decisions and be accountable for them, I only offer advice on how to choose group members effectively rather than pressuring them to work together. (T1)

When working with the members they select, students become more responsible. I have noticed that they put greater efforts to complete the group task so that they can achieve a good score for the group. (T4)

In agreement with the teachers, all the interviewed students reported that they preferred choosing their group-mates by themselves. They noted the convenience of forming groups by themselves and the contribution of closeness to sharing duties and preventing conflicts. As S1 and S9 shared:

It normally takes a lot of time to choose group members. So, when teachers let us choose members for a group task, we can quickly form groups. We will move to sit next to peers we want to work with quickly. Teachers do not waste time figuring out who should work with whom. (S1)

Teachers should let us choose our group members. We need to choose who we want to work with, especially those who have similar objectives. It is much easier to share duties and avoid disagreement if we already know each other well. (S9)

Both the teachers and the students thus shared their preference for self-selection of group members. While the teachers highlighted the development of self-responsibility, the students noted the ease of forming groups on their own and the value of closeness in avoiding conflicts and sharing duties.

Group size. Teachers' and students' perceptions of group size matched. All teachers reported a preference for small group sizes which consist of from three to five students in a group. As T1 and T4 commented:

I preferred smaller groups of three to five members because I like to assign three to five tasks for a group activity. I want to ensure that each member has a task to do and complete it on time. By so doing, each group member is responsible for the assigned task. (T1)

As I have noticed, students are more motivated to share their thoughts and join the discussion in a small group. I realized that it is easier to get things done and keeps everyone involved when a group is small. (T4)

Teacher 6 and Teacher 8 further added that one reason behind this preference reveals the teachers' concern about students' ineffective management of large groups. As T6 shared,

My students, in my opinion, do not have much groupwork experience; thus, it is easier for them to work in small groups of three to five members. The more members, the more ideas there are, yet it becomes harder to manage and come to agreement. (T6)

Eight of the students also preferred a small-size group. This group size, in their opinion, allowed for ample practice opportunities and ideas to share. They also shared the difficulty of working in large groups due to conflicts arising from task allocation and clashes of ideas. As S1 and S4 shared:

In a speaking class, for example, I have more opportunities to practice speaking with peers and feel more secure. When I can talk more, I can come up with more ideas to share. Also, time for a speaking task in class is restricted. Everyone needs to have enough time to express their ideas and respond to peers. (S1)

I used to work in a large group of seven students. Most of us struggled to work together since it was difficult to divide up duties and differing opinions frequently resulted in conflicts. (S4)

The comments showed a shared preference for small group sizes. Both the students and the teachers recognized opportunities for ample practice and individual contributions. However, while the teachers were concerned about lack of group management skills, the students cared more about conflicts arising from large-size groups.

Mismatches between teachers' and students' perceptions

Despite matches in the teachers' and students' perceptions of group work benefits, self-selection, and group size, students and teachers held varying perspectives on how to group students of varying abilities and personalities, the role of leadership in groups, and the use of peer assessment.

Ways of grouping. Although both teachers and students preferred self-selection of group members, they held contrasting preferences for ways of grouping. While the teachers allowed their students to select group members by themselves, they preferred them to form groups of diverse abilities and personalities. The students, however, actually chose to work with friends who shared abilities and interests.

All the teachers cited the value of mutual support in groups of mixed abilities and personality as a reason for their preferences. As T2 and T3 commented:

A mix of personalities is more helpful because there are students who are too shy to share their ideas. By grouping them with others who are more confident, these students will be motivated. (T2)

The differences regarding proficiency levels among group members will become a reason for stimulating peer support and peer learning. The good ones have chances to help their friends, while the weak can learn from them and build up interdependence within this group. (T3)

All students (excluding S5), however, dismissed this strategy. They reported their unwillingness to collaborate randomly with those they were not acquainted with. Moreover, they felt it "hard to reach shared goals when group members were unwilling to collaborate with others" (S10). The students also reported that they encountered many difficulties resulting from the differences in their abilities and personalities. As S6 said:

When I am grouped with those whom I do not know well, I am not willing to start a conversation. I have also found that sometimes the strong students dominate rather than help. I find it difficult to fit in and get demotivated easily. For me it is easier to work with close peers. (S6)

Based on the students' comments, it appears that the students did not want to work with peers who did not have similar skills and characteristics. They appeared to face more challenges than the teachers' appreciated options for peer assistance and collaboration.

Leadership roles in group activities. Four of the teachers appreciated the vital role that leadership played in activities involving group work. They were aware that not every student would make a good leader, but they preferred to divide up the duties so that every student could grow as a leader. As T4 and T5 stated:

Groups need a leader to track their work, distribute the tasks, and motivate group members. Students should take turns to become leaders and develop their leadership skills to effectively control their groups. (T4)

I think not all students can become good leaders, but leadership is still a good skill to learn. It is thus important for students to exercise leadership roles to gain leadership skills. (T5)

On the contrary, seven students perceived that leadership in group work can reduce their autonomy and self-reliance, if they worked in groups with dominant leaders. As S9 commented:

I once worked with a leader who dominated too much. She wanted to control, so I did not have a lot of chances to express my own ideas. Other members became passive and reluctant to contribute. They waited for ideas from the leader and tended to agree with her easily. (S9)

Not only group members but also group leaders expressed concern about shared leadership in group work. The five students who had experienced being group leaders considered their roles challenging. As S6 said:

As a group leader, I noticed that every group member waited for me rather than contributing their own ideas. While they consistently relied on my decisions, I had to make every decision. I experienced intense pressure. (S6)

In summary, while the teachers stressed the importance of developing leadership skills among students through shared leadership roles, some students perceived potential drawbacks, such as reduced autonomy and challenges faced by group leaders in managing the dynamics of the group.

Use of peer assessment. Three of the teachers reported that they used peer assessment to identify individual members' level of cooperation and contribution in completing group tasks. After a group task was completed, they asked students in each group to fill in a simple evaluation form to give brief comments on the contribution of each group member. They considered this a helpful strategy to encourage every group member to contribute equally and to be more actively engaged. As T6 commented:

Comments from the students helped me know more about contributions among group members as well as the effectiveness of group tasks. I also use them as a way to ensure that every group member is actively involved, and assessment is fair. (T6)

Three other teachers, however, noted that students tended to give positive comments to their peers and most comments were overly nice, like "Excellent, this is the best, it's great". Such comments, according to them, are not critical and useful for the assessment.

Further, T2 noted that he relied on peer assessment to cope with large-size classes and heavy marking workloads.

I normally use several forms of formative assessment to assess ongoing performance in class. Sometimes, I just find myself overloaded with marking. Asking students to rate their peer performance in certain assessments helps alleviate my burden. (T2)

Seven students, however, expressed dissatisfaction with unequal contributions among group members on some occasions, but they were not willing to comment on the members who had made limited contributions. They expressed that since they wanted to "maintain their group harmony" (S2), they avoided giving unfavorable comments. S2 had this to say:

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

The comment from the students appeared to imply that the use of peer assessment was less useful because of different expectations from the teachers and the students. The question remains regarding whether peer assessment is a valid means of assessing individual contribution to group performance if teachers' and students' expectations are not ignored.

Discussion

This study explored matches and mismatches in how teachers and students perceived the implementation of group work in EFL classrooms. The results indicated matches in relation to the benefits of group work, self-selection of group members, and small group sizes, but mismatches with regard to ways of grouping, the role of leadership, and the use of peer assessment.

Matches in teachers' and students' perceptions of group work implementation

The results revealed significant matches in both teachers' and students' perceptions regarding the implementation of group work in L2 classrooms. Both groups reported positive attitudes towards group learning. The teachers noted that participating in group work activities fostered L2 development, mutual support, and a sense of self-discipline and responsibility. The students felt that collaborative efforts and a friendly and supportive environment boosted their motivation and confidence. The teachers' and students' favorable opinions of group work are consistent with the results of earlier studies on the adoption of collaborative group work in various contexts (e.g., Dobao & Blum, 2013; Ghanbari & Abdolrezapour, 2020; Gillies & Boyle, 2010; Wang, 2021), suggesting that it would be beneficial to further explore and implement collaborative group work strategies in L2 classrooms.

Another noteworthy match pertains to agreement on group member selection. The results showed that both teachers and students shared their views on how group members should be selected. The students cited the self-selection of group members as their preference, which was also supported by the teachers. This finding supports those of earlier research (e.g., Chapman et al. 2006; Pham & Gillies, 2010; Wang, 2021), showing that group formation through self-selection has a positive effect on student attitudes and group work success. Chapman et al. (2006) find that students who are free to choose their own group members assess the group process as more valuable and effective than students randomly assigned to groups.

Similarly, both teachers and students expressed a preference for small group sizes (three to five members), echoing findings from previous studies (e.g., Chiriac & Granström, 2012; Dobao & Blum, 2013; Xiao, 2006). Most of the students believed that there were greater opportunities for L2 practice in small groups and more ideas to be generated. The findings, therefore, supplement the previous literature on effective group formation, indicating that Asian EFL students preferred close relationships and small group environments (Ghanbari & Abdolrezapour, 2020; Pham & Gillies, 2010).

Mismatches in teachers' and students' perceptions of group work implementation

While teachers and students expressed positive views on group work, self-selection of group members, and group size, they disagreed on issues related to ways of grouping, the role of leadership, and the use of peer assessment. First, regarding the way of grouping, an intriguing finding indicates that when given a choice, students tended to work with peers who had comparable skills and personalities, which resonates with recent research which pointed out that self-selected groups tend to be homogeneous (Le et al. 2018; Poort et al. 2022). In contrast,

teachers highlighted the benefits of heterogeneous groups, as also reported in several studies (e.g., Gillies & Boyle, 2010; Le et al. 2018), while allowing the students to self-select their own group members. This contrasting preference for grouping between the teachers and their students may be explained based on the gap between teachers' teaching strategies and students' learning orientation (Xiao, 2006). This finding further supports previous studies which found that Asian EFL students preferred working in friendship groupings and believed that this enabled them to benefit from the closeness that already existed among group members (Pham & Gillies, 2010; Phuong-Mai et al., 2005; Wang, 2021). However, this finding conflicts with those of Gillies and Boyle (2010), Le et al. (2018) and Poort et al. (2022) who found that friendship groups did not always function effectively because friends tended to socialize more than focus on group tasks. Moreover, these authors also found that this kind of grouping resulted in a lack of diversity of perspectives and cognitive engagement. It is, thus, important for teachers and students to be mindful of the potential drawbacks associated with self-selected groups. The challenge is to strike a balance between the benefits of self-selection of group members and the need for cognitive diversity to optimize the benefits of group work in L2 classrooms.

Second, in terms of leadership roles, the teachers believed that good group leaders facilitated group interaction and that developing skills in leadership was crucial. These findings confirm those of earlier studies (Hiromori et al., 2021; Leeming, 2019; Phuong-Mai et al., 2005; Yashima et al., 2016) which demonstrated that effective leadership is a key component of student interaction in the L2 classroom. Particularly, good leaders were found to encourage mutuality, reduce silences, and help the flow of conversation. The students' experiences in both leading and being led were negative, despite the advantages. Good group leaders felt under pressure to carry out their duties, but less competent group leaders exerted dominance and undermined the efficacy of the group. This finding highlights the important role of a group leader who needs to be carefully selected and trained to work effectively as a leader (Hoang & de Nooy, 2020).

Finally, regarding the use of peer assessment, the teachers held a positive attitude toward peer assessment, commenting that asking students to evaluate one another's contributions to group accomplishment would support fair grading and lighten workloads. The teachers' positive perceptions of peer assessment are supported by recent research which indicates that peer assessment is a reliable and valid way of assessing individual performances in L2 settings (Li et al., 2022; Saito & Fujita, 2009; Weaver & Esposito, 2012). However, the students, despite admitting that unfair contributions were common in group work activities, chose to ignore and resist assessing their group members' performance due to their concern for upsetting the cohesiveness of the group. This resistance has also been reported in previous studies (e.g., Le et al., 2018), showing that Vietnamese students tend to avoid criticism and disagreement to strive for group harmony. This contrasting preference regarding the use of peer assessment reveals another mismatch that needs to be solved for the effective implementation of group work.

Implications

Apart from promoting the matches regarding the benefits of group work, small group sizes, and self-selection of group members, for group work activities to be effectively implemented, there is a need to narrow the perceived mismatches between students and teachers in terms of ways of grouping, the role of leadership, and the use of peer assessment. One initial strategy

could be that teachers should clearly communicate their expectations to their students at the beginning of the course and encourage them to express their interests and needs. Early communication of expectations may help prevent misunderstandings and potential conflicts within groups. When students are aware of the benefits and goals of their group work, they are better positioned to work together harmoniously, develop cognition and personality (Villarreal & Munarriz-Ibarrola, 2021), and resolve any issues that may arise to optimize the language learning process.

The findings suggest that while both teachers and students are Asian, the teachers seem to “make frequent reference to Western perspectives” (Xiao, 2006, p. 11) by encouraging heterogeneous grouping and learner-centeredness through peer assessment and shared leaderships, whereas students’ preferences for homogeneous grouping and their attempts to maintain group harmony reflect their adherence to Asian cultural traits (Ghanbari & Abdolrezapour, 2020; Phuong-Mai et al., 2005; Xiao, 2006). The finding that the teachers appear to align more readily with Western educational perspectives is likely influenced by their exposure to and training in Western pedagogical approaches. This difference between teachers’ Western-oriented teaching methods and students’ traditional preferences could highlight a mismatch within the Vietnamese EFL context. Xiao (2006) raised the potential of teacher and student style conflicts due to mismatches in learning and teaching preferences, suggesting that teachers should consider style differences as they plan how to teach. They should be able to carefully plan out various group tasks or strategies to accommodate learners of varying interests and competences. Students should also reciprocate by broadening their repertoire of preferred styles to function well in a variety of group settings (Xiao, 2006). It is, therefore, important for teachers to carefully consider the cultural traits as they affect students’ willingness to collaborate, student engagement, and the effectiveness of group work activities (Hoang & de Nooy, 2020). Ghanbari and Abdolrezapour (2020) and Hoang and de Nooy (2020) also highlighted the importance of understanding cultural norms and preferences to create a culturally responsive and engaging learning environment.

Overall, the findings highlight the significance of preserving group harmony as a cultural trait, but also underscore the importance of raising awareness among both students and teachers about a potential drawback linked to self-selected groups. Empirical research evidence indicates a tendency towards homogeneity within such groups, resulting in a lack of diversity in perspectives and, consequently, lower cognitive engagement (Poort et al., 2022). It is, thus, crucial to find a balance between cultural values emphasizing group cohesion and the recognition of the need for diverse viewpoints in order to optimize the overall effectiveness of collaborative learning environments. In addition, from a pedagogical perspective, to mitigate this potential issue, teachers can allow students to choose whom to work with, but with certain requirements for diversity in terms of achievement levels, skills, and social backgrounds. Moreover, along with training to help students develop their leadership and evaluation skills, teachers should inform students of the benefits of diversity in group work and of serving as group leaders and peer assessors. As Choi and Iwashita (2016) suggest, training students to acquire a collaborative mindset - considering other group members as equal contributors, despite the possible differences in abilities and competence - may pave the way to better and more effective group interaction. Finally, training teachers in cooperative learning pedagogy is also needed. To conduct group work effectively, it is crucial to make sure teachers are fully aware of the matches and mismatches between students’ preferences and their own.

Limitations and conclusion

This study is not without limitations. First, it has a small sample size of six teachers and ten students, with only one male participant among both teachers and students. The limited number of students may not adequately represent the broader population, despite potentially encompassing diverse perspectives from participants across all four cohorts of the programs. Future studies should examine a greater number of teacher and student participants and balance gender representation. Second, the views of the teachers and students in the current study might vary slightly according to the class level and age range, but on the basis of this research, it was difficult to draw any firm conclusions about how the teachers' and students' opinions were affected by their proficiency levels and age ranges. It could be beneficial to carry out additional research at different proficiency levels and age ranges and investigate a wider range of issues affecting group work implementation, such as gender and task types in various disciplines. Moreover, classroom observations should be included in future studies to allow for the verification of results. Finally, similar studies should be conducted in other EFL or ESL contexts to provide a fuller picture of matches and mismatches in perceptions of group work implementation.

Despite limitations, insights into the alignment or disconnect between teachers and students, the two key stakeholders, are expected to inform instructional practices and facilitate mutual understanding in L2 classrooms. The significant discrepancies between teacher and student preferences in several areas of group work implementation point to the need for teachers to actively seek out their students' perspectives and to engage them in brief classroom discussions about the rationale behind certain instructional strategies. It is essential for teachers to prepare the students for how to work in group settings, which means training in how to plan and communicate in a group situation.

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APPENDIX A

Interview questions for students

1. How do you find your experiences with working in groups?
2. What are your views of group work implementation?
3. Who do you like to work with? Why?
4. How do your teachers assign groups? Do you prefer your teachers to assign or do you yourselves choose group-mates? Why?
5. What kind(s) of grouping work(s) well for you? What does not work well? Why (not)?
6. How do you find having a leader in a group? Do you prefer to work as a group leader?
7. How do you assess your peers' contributions to group work activities? Do you think you have made a fair assessment of their contributions?
8. What do you think about teachers' use of peer assessment of group work?

Interview questions for teachers

1. How do you find your experiences with implementing group work activities?
2. What are your views of group work implementation?
3. In your view, what is an effective learning group?
4. In what ways do you group students? Do you prefer to select students for a group, or do you want to let students select their own group members?
5. In your experience, what is the optimal group size? Do you have specific preferences regarding the number of group members?
6. How do you find having a leader in a group? How do you explain its benefits?
7. How do you find the use of peer assessment? Why do you use it?