Elements Hindering Vietnamese Tertiary Students' Participation in Group Activities: A Case Study

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Abstract:

Plenty of meticulous research has been conducted to investigate the entire process for implementing group activities in language classrooms. Nevertheless, few detailed empirical investigations have been pursued in the sub-area of what influences the participation of English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) students in group discussions. Thus, the present study was conducted to examine the elements impacting the group-work participation of first-year EFL students at University of Languages and International Studies (ULIS), Vietnam National University (VNU). Ten EFL freshmen and four teachers of English participated in the study over a four-week period by attending semi-structured interviews. The findings highlighted a variety of elements discouraging the learners' participation related to themselves, pedagogy, and culture and also revealed internal elements as the most significant.

Keywords*: Group activities, participation, Vietnamese tertiary students*

1. Introduction

1.1 Backgrounds and rationales

It has been widely believed that group work offers enormous advantages such as generating a supportive learning atmosphere, creating opportunities for learners to speak, enhancing their interactions, and promoting their autonomy (Elashhab, 2020; Jiang, 2009; Sharan, 2010; Tan et al., 2020). Thus, this form of organizing the class has been utilized extensively in English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) and EFL classrooms. The emphasis on its introduction is particularly considerable in Vietnamese educational settings as students

there are mostly EFL learners with few opportunities for English use in their daily lives (Vo, 2004). Nonetheless, there have been emerging debates on whether the approach works since this is claimed to largely depend on students' active participation (Core et al., 2003; Davis, 2009). Consequently, it is worth researching possible elements which might hinder them from participating adequately.

Various studies such as those by Abdullah (2012), Martine (2003), Mustapha et al. (2010), Taqi and Al-Nouh (2014), and Yuenfeng (2005) were conducted to address the abovementioned matter. Mustapha et al. (2010) investigated Malaysia EFL tertiary learners in single-culture groups and drew several conclusions concerning teachers' influences. Yuenfeng (2005) examined a similar population, yet the research site was in China, and he focused on two elements, namely task types and teachers' roles. Meanwhile, while identifying many possible deterrents, Martine (2003) studied multi-cultural groups of native-English-speaker (NS) and non-native-English-speaker (NNS) postgraduate students instead of single-culture ones of tertiary EFL learners.

With regard to Vietnam's educational context, the aforementioned issue has not been fully discussed despite the existence of several related studies such as the one by Vo (2004), which only examines the effects of grouping arrangements on student participation. This means thorough exploration into influential elements on EFL students' participation in single-culture group work remains a gap.

The urgency to do research into the matter tends to be desperate when it comes to the case of ULIS, VNU. Although group work is a familiar teaching method at Faculty of English Language Teacher Education (FELTE), ULIS, VNU, it is considerably new for the majority of freshmen, who have had little previous group-learning experience in high school. Consequently, it has inevitably posed huge challenges for both teachers and students at this site.

1.2 Research questions

The present study was conducted as an attempt to identify possible elements adversely impacting the EFL students' participation in group activities inside the classroom by addressing the following research question: "What elements hinder students' participation in group activities?" Hopefully, this research, focusing on single-culture groups of Vietnamese EFL students at tertiary level, could narrow the abovementioned research gaps and bring new perspectives to the field.

2. Literature review

2.1 ESL/ EFL learners' group-work participation

So far, research has focused largely on students' participation in classroom discussions, concerning both verbal and non-verbal aspects (Lee, 2005; Liu, 2001). Verbal participation includes exchanging questions, giving feedback, and joining discussions (Lee, 2005). Those failing to demonstrate such behaviour tend to be regarded as inactive learners. On the contrary, non-verbal participation refers to behavioural responses during the lesson such as head nodding, hand rising, and eye contact (Lee, 2005). Similarly, group participation can be assessed in terms of both verbal and non-verbal aspects. Nonetheless, evaluating non-verbal participation will take a large amount of time; therefore, due to time

constraints, the scope of this study was merely restricted to investigating students' verbal participation.

Students' participation is indispensable in group activities, boosting peer interaction and motivates their linguistic utilization (Core et al., 2003; Davis, 2009). Without participating actively, they will hardly gain any benefits of group work, which means that the introduction of group activities will be useless and wasteful. Nevertheless, the majority of learners lack awareness of the positives generated by group work, resulting in their reluctance to make contributions. Moreover, an empirical study by (Martine, 2003) on 14 Non-Native English Speakers (NNSs) and four Native English Speakers (NSs) in two MA teacher-training courses at the University of Birmingham revealed a high level of dominance of NS learners over NNS ones when discussing in groups. This is obvious because NNS students' language proficiency is known to be much lower than NS ones. However, it is also the case of groups of EFL learners as identified in the comprehensive study on Chinese first-year students by Yuenfeng (2005). Thus, it can be concluded that the imbalance in students' participation is likely to occur in any classroom contexts.

2.2. Elements influencing ESL/ EFL students' group-work participation

A large body of research has explored numerous elements that might stimulate or prevent ESL/ EFL learners from group-work involvement. Those can be grouped into three categories, namely internal, pedagogical, and cultural ones.

Claims about ESL/EFL students' lack of participation in group work largely focus on elements associated with students themselves. The first significant element is language difficulties. Martine (2003) highlighted some participants' anxiety about language proficiency (that is, inadequate vocabulary and grammatical structures), which made them unable to present ideas and thus prone to remaining quiet for most parts of the group discussions. Secondly, background knowledge or knowledge of the discussed themes is of vital importance (Yuenfeng, 2005). For instance, some hesitate to speak due to being hardly aware of the topic and coming up with few ideas (Martine, 2003). Also, he supposes that sometimes feeling awkward due to their limited knowledge possibly accounts for passive interaction. He also figures out students' difficulties with several aspects of discourse as a detrimental element. In his study, many Asian learners expressed their little familiarity with taking turns and confusion about the application of turn taking when working with peers. Specifically, they did not know when and how to take turns.

Besides, students' perspectives on group work might influence their participation. For instance, in Martine's research (2003), some participants claimed that their positive attitudes toward group work stimulated them to raise their voice during group discussions with NSs. Another element is students' previous experience with group work. The lack of exposure to group work could be a great hindrance (Martine, 2003; Taqi and Al-Nouh, 2014). Despite their desire to participate, it might be difficult for them to do so since they are not familiar with working in groups, lacking group-work or communication skills to negotiate with others. Lastly, students' personalities somehow affect the participation. Yuenfeng (2005) and Ababneh (2017) indicate shyness as what likely discourages them from contributing and raising their voice whilst Mahyuddin et al. (2006) supposes that students' self-efficacy entails their confidence in presenting their ideas in groups.

When it comes to pedagogical elements, the task difficulty and the topic interest can have influences on whether learners are willing to speak. In Vo's research into Vietnamese secondary students (2004), some chose to say nothing because the topic sounded tedious or challenging. Additionally, teachers' roles play a part in learners' participation. According to Vo's (2004), unless the teacher establishes specific participation rules, they will not be encouraged to interact with their group members. Additionally, Yuenfeng (2005) drew attention to the teacher's explicit instructions as well as his or her little intervention during the group-work process, which could boost the students' participation level with a greater balance. Abdullah (2012), Dallimore et al. (2004), and Mustapha et al. (2010) also mentioned the significance of several qualities that teachers possess: supportiveness, understanding, friendliness, and open-mindedness to name but a few. Kamarudin et al. (2009) referred to several of teachers' classroom management techniques that might enhance students' group interactions, including monitoring the group process and rewarding them. Finally, learners are seriously influenced by peers (Abdullah, 2012; Mustapha et al., 2010). According to Ohata (2005), despite their initial intention to contribute their ideas, they might feel anxious for fear of negative evaluation from others. Meanwhile, Vo (2004) emphasized the influence of common interests by indicating students' discomfort and boredom when working with those they dislike. In other words, the level of participation partly depends on group members' willingness to cooperate. In addition, peers' limited participation has an unexpected effect on those who are active: they are forced to contribute more than they like due to the shortage of input from others (Martine, 2003). Cayanus and Martin (2004) also concluded that open-minded peers tend to motivate others to speak.

With regard to cultural elements, a few researchers reached consensus on the role of culture in ESL/EFL learner participation in groups due to its effects on their approaches to group work (Anyanwu, 2000, as cited in Melles, 2004; Martine, 2003; Yuenfeng, 2005). First, being afraid of losing others' respect is fairly typical of Asian culture. Martine (2003) figured out that the participants in his study were scared of losing face in front of their peers whereas Yuenfeng (2005) reveals students' tendency to remain quiet for fear of being less respected by the teacher. Furthermore, silence is likely to be appreciated in some nations, especially in Asia, with the prevailing assumption of the silent classroom environment (Martin, 2003; Yuenfeng, 2005). It is noticeable that in Martine's study (2003), some Asian participants' non-participation resulted from their unawareness of NS group members' low appreciation of silence. Finally, compromising is valued in several cultures, leading to learners' reluctance to raise their voice in order to minimize arguments.

3. Research methodology

3.1 Participants

The target population comprised ten EFL freshmen from two classes at FELTE at ULIS, VNU. The main reason for choosing them was that they had just started their study at university for a short period of time; as a result, they might not get used to university studying and teaching methods.

The participants were also four teachers of English at FELTE at ULIS, VNU who were teaching those classes. This sample was selected in order to support data triangulation. It is worth examining the teachers' views to see whether there was any mismatch between

the teachers' views and the students' own consciousness. This would also undoubtedly increase the research's objectivity.

3.2 Data collection and analysis

There were two types of interviews, one for the teachers and one for the students. Both focused on the same question about the elements hindering students' oral participation in group discussions. As the interviews went along, possible relevant questions would be added to generate more useful details.

The data were collected during the period of four weeks. First, ten volunteer students, five in each class, none of which was taught by the researcher, attended the interviews administered by the researcher herself in Vietnamese in an open, relaxing setting. Those interviews were often ten minutes long. Besides, teacher interviews of five to ten minutes were conducted in English with four teachers teaching those students in a relaxing, friendly setting. The interviews were recorded upon the agreement of the interviewees to ensure covering all the essential details with few threats to credibility of the data.

The recordings of teacher interviews were transcribed while those of student interviews, which were all in Vietnamese, were transcribed and then translated into English. After that, thematic analysis was utilized with all the data analysed and categorized into relevant areas to the research question.

4. Findings

4.1 Internal elements hindering students' participation in group activities

A prevailing deterrent was language difficulties, which troubled the majority of the students. Seven of them had problems with vocabulary: "I think my vocabulary influenced me much. I couldn't express my ideas" (S10) or "I am not very confident about my vocabulary and my ways to express ideas. I often have difficulties expressing my ideas. I often just understand my ideas but don't know how to say them in English" (S2). This was understandable because vocabulary was always needed to produce meaningful linguistic expressions. It is necessary to note that three of these acknowledged their understanding of their ideas in Vietnamese and their inability to express those in English. Only S4 was not troubled by vocabulary; she even appeared to be the most confident about her proficiency level of English as she got the highest entrance mark. Furthermore, language difficulties could result in their lack of confidence like in the case of S1: "Very often I am not confident. This is because I lack vocabulary, and I don't know how to express my ideas fluently." Coincidentally, this element was also acknowledged by all the teachers: "Their command of English is not good enough for them to discuss in English; therefore, they find it hard and prefer to do this task individually" (T2) or "Their English competence is not good enough to impress others with their emotion and feelings" (T3).

Another element was insufficient concentration. Nearly half of the interviewed students experienced it, which made them unaware of being working in groups at times. Most of them could identify the reasons: not having breakfast before class (S5), missing the family (S1), thinking of sad things (S6), and background noise of other groups' discussions (S9). Only S8 could not make any excuse: "I didn't really concentrate in class. I didn't know why. When I read the topic, I didn't pay much attention to it, so in fact, I was not clear about the things we had to discuss in groups." It is noteworthy that she tended to lose concentration

in every in-class activity: "I usually find it hard to concentrate whenever engaging in any activities in class." Lacking concentration appeared to have become part of her habit; thus, she could not be aware of its cause.

In addition, little previous experience with group work and different English skills hindered learners' participation. S5 admitted her lack of group-work experience: "When I entered university, I was not accustomed to group work, so I did not contribute much. In secondary school, I had never studied in groups." Meanwhile, S2 stated the impacts of lacking experience with both group activities and different English skills: "In secondary school, I did not have chance to learn speaking skills and engage in group work …Teachers didn't provide us with chance to practice other English skills and just focused on strategies to pass the university entrance exam." The given opinions indicated that education at lower levels tended to be exam-oriented, which led to students' unfamiliarity with group activities. This element was also mentioned by all the teachers. "Group work is a new learning method for first-year students. Most of them worked with the old version of English course book at high school; thus, they are not familiar with group work. Some of them prefer working individually" said T1. T2 also explained: "Many do not know how to work in groups; it is totally new to them, so they tend to keep silent."

Furthermore, the shortage of ideas prevented around a third of the total student population from participating. As S8 explained, "I did not have many ideas for this topic… The ideas that I gave out were not various." This might lead to the repetition of ideas among group members: "When I listened to my friends, I saw that their ideas were nearly the same as mine, so I thought it was not necessary to give out my ideas. I just listened" (S6).

Another influential element was students' personality. S10 confessed: "I hesitated to participate due to my shyness. I am often shy when working with girls." In fact, this was a male student while most of the students in the Faculty were females, which could help to explain for his shyness. S6 also claimed: "I am shy. It's my personality. When not being engaged in any group activity, I am rather quiet." Noticeably, this element was referred to by one teacher (T3).

Additionally, preference to working individually was mentioned by two students (S2 and S3): "I am not accustomed to group work. If possible, I prefer working individually as I can manage more easily in terms of time and ideas. When I try my best, the outcome is of my own" (S2). Surprisingly, both had little previous group-work experience and expressed their unfamiliarity with studying in groups. Thus, it could be seen that secondary-school experience had enormous impacts on their preference to working individually.

Being afraid of making mistakes also hindered the participation of two students (S2 and S4). Despite their initial desire to speak, they did not dare to speak for their anxiety of being underrated: "Although I want to speak, I am afraid of making mistakes because others will see my weaknesses and laugh at them. At the beginning of the semester, I experienced that feeling when I made pronunciation and expression mistakes" (S2).

Another hindrance was students' negative attitudes towards group activities as stated by merely one student (S2): "I don't like group work because there are so many ideas which might result in disagreements and arguments. Those don't lead to anything effective since

everyone considers their own ideas to be correct." It seemed that she had several negative group-work experiences, especially involved in peers.

It is interesting to note that the adverse impact of students' health or mental status was acknowledged by one teacher (T3): "Sometimes, some may be ill or sad, so they will not participate."

4.2 Pedagogical elements hindering students' oral participation in group activities

First, discussion topic was the most prominent and direct. It is noteworthy that the majority of students paid much more attention to the interesting level of the topic than its difficult level. Six of them said that many topics did not inspire them to participate: "I didn't know anything about the topic. It was not interesting; it was so boring. I didn't want to say anything" (S6) or "Some topics such as talking about history are not realistic. I find them very boring. Topics related to economics or politics are also so boring. For those topics, I just sit and listen" (S5). Strikingly, all the teachers also perceived this as a significant element: "For some topics that are not really interesting or close to them, I find my students get stuck in silence" (T2). T3 even gave a specific instance: "When students are asked to tell others about one past event (a dream), or an unforgettable experience, they are not interested in this as those topics are very personal. Only those who really have an exciting experience would speak." The level of difficulty of the topic also negatively influenced students' participation, but it appeared to be less troublesome: "I understood its meaning, but I couldn't think of any supporting ideas and examples for it. It is difficult to discuss such kind of quotation in Vietnamese, let alone discuss it in English" (S6). Moreover, this was pointed out to be closely associated with their background knowledge. Contrary to S5 who found it boring to discuss such topics like economics, S2 stressed on the difficulty of those due to her lack of background knowledge: "When discussing such topics as economics, I don't want to discuss because it's difficult. I don't understand them; my economics vocabulary is very poor." Lacking background knowledge was also acknowledged by S5: "When my knowledge about the discussion topic is limited, my ideas will be limited as well. In that case, I will have nothing to say."

Additionally, the student interviewees admitted being discouraged by their group members. For example, nearly half of them were influenced by peers' participation level: "When they are silent, the atmosphere is boring; then I don't desire to participate" (S5). S2 even appeared to be a little negative: "There are some who just talk but not listen. I don't want to argue with them. They speak so much and dominate the others. I don't want to interfere in them; if they want to speak, I let them do it." This might be derived from her negative experiences concerning peers' dominance in group activities. Additionally, three students identified peers' inability to express ideas as a detrimental element: "I don't understand what my friends say and they even don't understand what they are trying to say, partly because their expressions are not good and their pronunciation is wrong. I soon lose interest in group work" (S2). Disagreements among peers also prevented three from contributing: "My friends gave ideas, but I didn't agree with them, so I didn't want to participate" (S7) or : "At times when I contribute my ideas- the ones that I like most, if my friends don't agree with me, I will feel sad and not contribute more for a short time' (S4). S4 also acknowledged the impact of arguments among other members on her. Furthermore, the peer-related elements acknowledged by only one or two students each

included insufficient peer attention (S2) and peers' lack of cooperation and support (S4 and S2). Noticeably, three of four teachers paid special attention to the adverse influence of peers' negative responses and attitudes on the students during group activities: "If there are some members who do not want to discuss or seem to ignore the task, the others will be discouraged, and it is likely that they will have the similar behavior" (T3) or "Sometimes, when one speaks but others do not really pay attention to, this will make that person hesitant to continue to raise his/her ideas" (T3).

Another hindrance was the teacher's intervention during group discussions. Two students (S4 and S7) admitted that they tended to participate less with teachers' observation and support during the activities: "My teacher doesn't go around observing us in group work. She often does something to prepare for the next activity. However, I think her help during group work is very essential for us" (S4). Coincidentally, this was agreed by all the teachers who claimed that their absence during the implementation of the activities adversely influenced students much: "Whenever I do not observe their groups, they tend to go off the track or get stuck with the task" (T1) or "It is the fact that some group may fail to perform the task when they see that the teacher is not there" (T4).

One element mentioned by only one teacher (T3) was the time that the activity takes place: "If the group activity is held nearly at the end of the lesson, the students might be tired, and therefore, lose enthusiasm to participate."

4.3 Cultural elements hindering students' oral participation in group activities

Disagreements could be derived from the fear of hurting others like in the case of S2: "There are some ideas I don't agree with, but I don't want to express my disagreement because I am afraid that they will not be satisfied. I don't want to join any arguments." This might be linked to the value of compromising, which possibly stimulates students to avoid arguing.

5. Discussion

The findings from the teacher and student interviews reflected that the students were discouraged by a variety of elements, among which the category of internal ones appeared to be the most outstanding. However, there existed a slight mismatch between teachers' viewpoints and students' own awareness of the elements hindering their participation in group activities. Specifically, the teachers did not show an insight into the impacts of internal elements, which were thoroughly discussed by the students. Meanwhile, the effect of time to conduct the activity was acknowledged by the teachers, yet no students mentioned this.

These findings are comparatively similar to what has been identified in the previous empirical projects (Abdullah, 2012; Martine, 2003; Taqi and Al-Nouh, 2014; Vo, 2004; Yuenfeng, 2005). Still, the participants in the present study did not seem to be influenced by all the elements mentioned in the literature. Instead, they were affected by some others, namely lack of concentration, shortage of ideas, time limit, and health. Moreover, the participants in this study were strongly affected by many peer-related elements such as peers' encouragements, help, disagreements, and attitudes while previous researchers like Abdullah (2012), Cayanus and Martin (2004), Martine (2003), Mustapha et al. (2010), Ohata (2005), and Vo (2004) identified peer impacts, but those only mentioned the effects

of several elements such as peers' negative comments, discomfort and boredom when working with those they dislike, and peers' lack of participation. This can be explained by the group forms: all the students in the present investigation came from one Asian cultural background – Vietnam where collectivism and the community are highly valued.

Therefore, people within a community would tend to have enormous influences on each other. Furthermore, the present study did not indicate as many culture-related elements as the ones by Martine (2003) or Melles (2004). This could be explained by the cultural background of the participants. All came from one culture; as a result, there were few cultural differences and, thus, few cultural conflicts. Finally, unlike the students in Yuenfeng's study (2005), whose participation was encouraged by the teacher's absence during group work, this tended to hinder the students in this research from participating. This might result from the teacher-centred approach applied in Vietnam for long time, which possibly made students overestimate teachers' roles in providing language input to boost their learning rather than that generated by themselves and their peers.

6. Conclusion

The study was conducted as an attempt to find out possible influential elements on their participation. The student participants were adversely influenced by internal, pedagogical, and cultural elements with the first category as the most outstanding. They did not seem to be influenced by all the elements mentioned in the literature. Instead, they were affected by some others, namely lack of concentration, shortage of ideas, group roles, time limit, and health condition. In addition, there existed a slight mismatch between teachers' viewpoints and students' own awareness of those elements. Due to various constraints and scope of the study, the present study displays several limitations. First of all, due to objective conditions, only five teachers and ten students were involved in the research, which might somehow affect the richness of the data collected. Second, this research could not go deep into each category of influential elements as well as the influence level of each individual element.

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