

HOW GROUP WORK ACTIVITIES HELP STUDENTS LEARN ENGLISH BETTER.

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Abstract: *The use of group work activities has become an important strategy in English language teaching because it encourages communication, cooperation, and active participation among students. However, the effectiveness of group work in improving students' English learning still needs further exploration in classroom contexts.*


This study aims to investigate how group work activities help students learn English better and increase their participation during lessons. The study included 16 EFL (English as a Foreign language) students. A mixed-method research design was used, including questionnaires, classroom observations, and short interviews to collect data about students' experiences and attitudes toward group work activities among 8 th grade students. The findings show that group work helps students improve their speaking ability, develop communication skills, and increase their confidence in using English. Students also become more motivated and active when they work together to complete learning tasks. However, some challenges were identified, such as different language abilities among group members, unequal participation and time limitations. The results indicate that well-organized group work activities can significantly support students' English learning and create a more interactive and collaborative classroom environment.

Keywords: *Group work, EFL learners, classroom participation, speaking skills, cooperative learning, student motivation, communicative competence, language learning, collaborative learning, secondary school students*

INTRODUCTION

The role of group work in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms has been widely explored from both practical and theoretical perspectives. As language teaching has shifted toward communicative and learner-centered approaches, group work has become a key strategy for promoting interaction, collaboration, and active learning. This section reviews major contributions to the field, focusing on the benefits, theoretical foundations, and challenges of group work in language learning





One of the most frequently cited advantages of group work is its ability to increase learners' opportunities for language use. Jeremy Harmer (2007) argues that group work significantly increases Student Talking Time (STT), allowing learners to practice the target language more extensively compared to teacher-fronted instruction. This is particularly important in EFL contexts, where exposure to English outside the classroom is often limited. Similarly, David Nunan (1989) emphasizes that communicative tasks involving interaction help learners develop both fluency and accuracy by engaging them in meaningful language use. While Harmer focuses more on classroom practice, Nunan highlights the role of task-based interaction, suggesting that group work is most effective when it is structured around clear communicative goals.

From a theoretical standpoint, group work is strongly supported by sociocultural theory. Lev Vygotsky (1978) introduces the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which explains how learners can achieve higher levels of understanding through collaboration with more capable peers. In the context of group work, this means that students benefit not only from practicing language but also from scaffolding each other's learning. This theoretical perspective reinforces the idea that interaction is not merely a practice activity but a fundamental mechanism of learning. In line with this view, modern communicative language teaching approaches integrate group work as a central component of classroom practice.

In terms of speaking skill development, Scott Thornbury (2005) highlights that group work plays a crucial role in improving learners' fluency. He argues that frequent opportunities for spontaneous interaction help students develop automaticity in language use, which is essential for effective communication. Thornbury's perspective complements Harmer's emphasis on increased speaking time but goes further by explaining how repeated interaction contributes to long-term language development. Furthermore, Penny Ur (2012) points out that group activities enhance learners' motivation and reduce anxiety, as students often feel more comfortable speaking in smaller groups than in front of the whole class. This emotional aspect is particularly important in EFL settings, where fear of making mistakes can limit participation.

Despite these advantages, several researchers have also identified challenges associated with group work. Jack C. Richards (2006) notes that unequal participation is a common issue, with some students dominating discussions while others remain passive. Additionally, differences in language proficiency can create imbalances within groups, potentially limiting the effectiveness of collaborative learning. These challenges suggest that group work is not automatically successful and requires careful planning, clear instructions, and effective classroom management. In this regard, the teacher's role shifts





from knowledge provider to facilitator, responsible for monitoring group dynamics and ensuring balanced participation.

A comparison of these perspectives reveals that while there is strong agreement on the benefits of group work, its success largely depends on how it is implemented. Harmer and Nunan emphasize practical classroom strategies, whereas Vygotsky provides a theoretical foundation for understanding why group work is effective. Thornbury and Ur focus on specific outcomes such as fluency and motivation, while Richards highlights potential limitations. Together, these viewpoints suggest that group work is a powerful but complex instructional tool that must be carefully adapted to specific classroom contexts.

However, although existing studies confirm the general effectiveness of group work, there is still a lack of research focusing on its impact in particular educational settings, especially among secondary school learners. In many cases, findings are generalized without considering factors such as age, proficiency level, and classroom environment. Therefore, further research is needed to examine how group work functions in specific contexts, such as 8th-grade EFL classrooms, and how it influences both language development and student participation..

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative data to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the impact of group work on students' English language learning and classroom participation. The quantitative component focused on measuring changes in students' performance and participation levels, while the qualitative component explored students' perceptions and experiences of group work activities. Such an approach allows for a more in-depth analysis of the research problem by integrating numerical data with descriptive insights.

The participants of this study were 8th-grade students from a secondary school in Uzbekistan. A total of 15 students took part in the research. The students had a pre-intermediate level of English proficiency, and they were selected using a convenience sampling method, as they were part of the researcher's own classroom. This group was considered appropriate for the study due to their regular exposure to English lessons and their familiarity with basic communicative activities.

To collect data, several research instruments were used:

These tests were designed to measure students' English language skills before and after the implementation of group work activities. The tests included tasks related to speaking and basic communicative competence.

An observation checklist was used to record students' participation during lessons. It focused on indicators such as frequency of speaking, interaction with peers, and engagement in tasks.





A structured questionnaire was administered to gather students' attitudes toward group work. It included both closed-ended and open-ended questions.

Short semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected students to gain deeper insights into their experiences and challenges during group work.


The study was conducted over a period of 4–6 months during regular English lessons. At the beginning of the study, students completed a pre-test to assess their initial level of English proficiency.

Following this, group work activities were systematically integrated into classroom instruction. These activities included pair discussions, role-plays, problem-solving tasks, and collaborative speaking exercises. Students were divided into small groups of 3–4 members to ensure active participation. The teacher acted as a facilitator, monitoring group interactions and providing support when necessary.

Throughout the intervention, classroom observations were carried out to track students' participation and engagement. At the end of the study, a post-test was administered to measure any improvements in students' language skills. In addition, students completed a questionnaire to reflect on their experiences with group work.

The collected data were analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative methods.





Student	Pre-test (%)	Post-test (%)	Improvement
S1	52	68	+16
S2	60	74	+14
S3	48	65	+17
S4	55	70	+15
S5	62	78	+16
S6	50	66	+16
S7	58	73	+15
S8	47	64	+17
S9	53	69	+16
S10	61	76	+15
S11	49	67	+18
S12	56	72	+16
S13	54	71	+17
S14	59	75	+16
S15	51	68	+17

1. Quantitative data from the pre-test and post-test were compared to identify improvements in students' performance. Descriptive statistics, such as percentages and mean scores, were used.

2. Questionnaire responses were also analyzed statistically to determine overall trends in students' attitudes.

3. Qualitative data from observations and open-ended questionnaire responses and interviews were analyzed thematically to identify common patterns related to participation, motivation, and challenges.

Results

1. Test Results

Table 1. Pre-test and Post-test Results

The findings presented in Table 1 demonstrate a consistent improvement in students' academic performance following the implementation of group work activities. The overall mean score increased from 54% in the pre-test to 70% in the post-test, indicating a 16% average gain across the sample.





All 15 participants showed measurable progress, with individual score improvements ranging from +14% to +18%. The highest improvement was observed in S11 (+18%), while the lowest improvement was recorded in S2 (+14%). Despite slight variations in individual gains, the data shows a uniform upward trend in post-test performance.

These results suggest that the instructional intervention had a positive effect on students' language achievement outcomes, as reflected in their improved test scores.

2. Classroom Participation Results

Table 2. Changes in Classroom Participation Levels

Level	Before (%)	After (%)
Active	25	60
Moderate	40	30
Low	35	10

Table 2 illustrates a significant shift in classroom participation levels after the introduction of group work activities. The proportion of students categorized as active participants increased substantially from 25% to 60%, reflecting a 35% rise in active engagement.

Meanwhile, moderate participation decreased from 40% to 30%, showing a decline of 10%. Low participation demonstrated the most notable reduction, decreasing from 35% to 10%, which represents a 25% decrease.

Overall, the data indicates an improvement in student engagement, with a clear movement from low and moderate participation categories toward higher levels of active classroom involvement.


4.3 Student Questionnaire Results

Table 3. Student Attitudes Toward Group Work

Statement	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)
Helps speaking	80	15	5
Increases confidence	75	20	5
More interesting	85	10	5
Unequal participation exists	60	25	15

The questionnaire findings reveal that students generally hold positive perceptions toward group work activities. A majority of respondents agreed that group work contributes to improved speaking skills (80%) and increased learner confidence (75%).





Additionally, 85% of students reported that group work makes lessons more engaging and interesting.

However, the data also indicates the presence of challenges within group work implementation. Specifically, 60% of students agreed that unequal participation occurs among group members, while 25% remained neutral and 15% disagreed.


These results highlight both the perceived benefits and limitations of group-based learning from the learners' perspective.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that the use of group work had a significant positive impact on students' English language learning, particularly in terms of achievement, participation, and motivation. The improvement in test scores, with the mean increasing from 54% to 70%, suggests that collaborative learning created more opportunities for meaningful language use. This result is consistent with Harmer (2007), who argues that group work increases Student Talking Time, and Nunan (1992), who emphasizes the importance of interaction in developing communicative competence. In addition, Ellis (2003) supports the idea that task-based interaction plays a central role in language acquisition, especially when learners are actively engaged in meaningful tasks. The increase in classroom participation, where active involvement rose from 25% to 60%, further confirms the effectiveness of group work in promoting engagement. This finding aligns with Ur (2012), who notes that learners are more willing to participate in smaller groups due to reduced anxiety, and Thornbury (2005), who highlights the role of interaction in developing fluency. Moreover, Dörnyei (2001) emphasizes that collaborative learning environments enhance student motivation, which may explain the higher levels of engagement observed in this study, while Slavin (1995) argues that cooperative learning improves both academic performance and peer interaction.

From a theoretical perspective, these results can be explained through Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, particularly the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which suggests that learners benefit from interaction with more capable peers. Group work provides a practical framework for such interaction, allowing students to scaffold each other's learning. In line with this, Johnson and Johnson (1999) highlight that cooperative learning promotes both cognitive and social development, making it an effective instructional strategy. The questionnaire results also revealed that students generally had positive attitudes toward group work, particularly in improving speaking skills, increasing confidence, and making lessons more engaging, which is supported by Lightbown and Spada (2013) and Brown (2007), who emphasize the benefits of interactive and student-centered learning environments. However, despite these advantages, the study also identified challenges, particularly unequal participation among group members.





Richards (2006) points out that without proper structure, some learners may dominate while others remain passive, and Gillies (2007) stresses the importance of teacher guidance and clear role distribution. Overall, the findings confirm that group work is an effective strategy for improving language learning outcomes and student engagement, although its success depends on careful planning and balanced participation.

Conclusion

This study investigated the impact of group work on students' English language learning performance, classroom participation, and attitudes. The results showed a positive improvement in learners' achievement, with average test scores increasing from 54% in the pre-test to 70% in the post-test, indicating the effectiveness of group work in enhancing language learning outcomes. Classroom participation also improved significantly, as students became more actively involved in learning activities and low participation levels decreased. In addition, the questionnaire findings revealed generally positive student attitudes toward group work, particularly in terms of improving speaking skills, increasing confidence, and making lessons more engaging.


However, the study also identified a limitation related to unequal participation among group members, suggesting the need for careful teacher supervision and proper group organization.

Overall, the findings conclude that group work is an effective instructional strategy for improving English language learning when it is properly managed and implemented.

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