

DIVERSE GROUPINGS IN TEACHING ENGLISH-SPEAKING SKILLS

Le Nhut Long

Foreign Languages Faculty, Dong Thap University, Cao Lanh 870000, Vietnam

Email: lnlong@dthu.edu.vn

Article history

Received: 25/4/2024; Received in revised form: 03/6/2024; Accepted: 12/6/2024

Abstract

This study aims to investigate the effects of diverse groupings on learners' English-speaking skills. Accordingly, diverse groupings as an intervention procedure were implemented over an English-speaking course. This course lasted 15 weeks and 48 EFL students from a university in Vietnam enrolled in the course. On the completion of the course, quantitative data were collected via a questionnaire surveying the involved students' evaluations of the effects of the intervention procedure. Meanwhile, participants' reflections on the course recorded in audio files served as qualitative data for the study. The obtained results from both quantitative and qualitative data reveal that participants highly valued the course because it facilitated their English speaking skills as well as cognitive and social skills. These positive effects were derived from practicing English speaking with various partners. In addition, qualitative data recorded their perspectives on different preferences for partners in group work. These patterns include partners' English proficiency levels, sex, partnership selection, and working duration. On these results, pedagogical implications are addressed. Further expanded research in this regard within Vietnam and beyond is also suggested to overcome the present study's limitations.

Keywords: *Diverse grouping, EFL, effect, group work, skill.*

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.52714/dthu.13.7.2024.1337>.

Cite: Le, N. L. (2024). Diverse groupings in teaching English-speaking skills. *Dong Thap University Journal of Science*, 13(7), 46-59. <https://doi.org/10.52714/dthu.13.7.2024.1337>.

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ĐA DẠNG HÓA HÌNH THỨC PHÂN NHÓM TRONG DẠY HỌC KỸ NĂNG NÓI TIẾNG ANH

Lê Nhật Long

Khoa Ngoại ngữ, Trường Đại học Đồng Tháp, Việt Nam

Email: lnlong@dthu.edu.vn

Lịch sử bài báo

Ngày nhận: 25/4/2024; Ngày nhận chỉnh sửa: 03/6/2024; Ngày duyệt đăng: 12/6/2024

Tóm tắt

Nghiên cứu này nhằm mục đích khảo sát, đánh giá hiệu ứng của hoạt động đa dạng hóa phân nhóm đến kỹ năng nói tiếng Anh của người học. Theo đó, các dạng thức hoạt động nhóm khác nhau được áp dụng trong một học phần phát triển kỹ năng nói tiếng Anh. Học phần kéo dài trong 15 tuần với 48 sinh viên chuyên ngành tiếng Anh ở một trường đại học Việt Nam tham gia học phần này. Khi kết thúc học phần, dữ liệu định lượng được thu thập bằng bảng câu hỏi khảo sát nhận xét, đánh giá của sinh viên tham gia về hiệu quả của học phần. Song song đó, mỗi sinh viên sẽ trình bày chi tiết nhận xét về các hình thức học nhóm được áp dụng trong học phần và được ghi âm thành các tập tin, cung cấp dữ liệu định tính cho nghiên cứu này. Kết quả thu được từ cả dữ liệu định lượng và định tính cho thấy sinh viên đánh giá cao về hiệu ứng của học phần trong việc thúc đẩy phát triển kỹ năng nói tiếng Anh cũng như phát triển năng lực tư duy và giao tiếp xã hội. Các hiệu ứng tích cực này đạt được thông qua quá trình thực hành giao tiếp bằng tiếng Anh với nhiều đối thể khác nhau. Ngoài ra, kết quả phân tích dữ liệu định tính còn ghi nhận những quan điểm, lý giải khác nhau về sở thích cá nhân của sinh viên khi tham gia hoạt động nhóm với các đối thể nhóm khác nhau; gồm có các sở thích về năng lực tiếng Anh, giới tính, sự lựa chọn, và thời lượng tương tác với đối thể nhóm. Trên cơ sở kết quả thu được, các hàm ý về dạy học liên quan được đề xuất. Các nghiên cứu mở rộng tiếp theo về vấn đề phân nhóm ở Việt Nam và nước ngoài được khuyến khích thực hiện nhằm khắc phục những hạn chế của nghiên cứu này.

Từ khóa: Đa dạng hóa phân nhóm, hiệu ứng, hoạt động nhóm, kỹ năng, ngoại ngữ tiếng Anh (EFL).

1. Introduction

Group work functioning as a teaching tool is now widely deployed in the classroom across school subjects and disciplines at the levels of primary, secondary, and tertiary education worldwide (Chen et al., 2022; Do, 2023; Jia, 2022; Jitpaisarnwattana et al., 2021; Krasny et al., 2018; Treesattayanmune & Baharudin, 2024; Yassi et al., 2023). This teaching tool is aligned with the learner-centered approach because it optimally promotes learner-learner or peer interactions, granting students at their disposal some autonomized time and sufficient space to interact (basically in spoken forms and with little or without teacher intervention). They together share ideas, negotiate for making joint decisions to complete given learning tasks/assignments, and thus learn from each other in some ways. Although the presence of learning resulting from such a communicatively collaborative interaction is somehow invisible or sheerly implicit, it is unquestioningly advantageous to driving students' conscious attempts to utilize their speaking skills (backed up by other personal resources like living experiences and topics/content knowledge) for obtaining set goals or task completions underway (Azizifard, 2024; Do, 2023; Johnson & Johnson, 2018). That is why group work of various types has been prevalently applied in language learning classes, especially in teaching speaking skills communicatively of English as a foreign language (EFL). As Do and Le (2020, p. 445) posited "If administered properly, group work in EFL speaking classes is highly promising to be a freely available tool for teachers to help learners not only practice speaking English communicatively but also improve the ability to work with others in collaboration to complete common goals".

When it comes to facilitating students' practicing speaking skills in EFL/ESL (English as a second language), past research dominantly embarked on delivering topic-based prompts /questions for small group discussions or whole-class debates (e.g., Do & Le, 2020; Nguyen, 2023; Namaziandost et al., 2020; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018; Treesattayanmune & Baharudin, 2024). For longer member-member connections, project-based executions are applied for product creation or problem-solving (Bakar et al.,

2019; Khoiriyah & Setyaningrum, 2015; Pham et al., 2024; Sirisrimangkorn, 2021; Sugianto et al., 2020). Yet, few studies have focused on diversifying group work activities to help sustain student engagement and avoid a possible sense of boredom due to similar activities done by the same group members in the classroom. Furthermore, the diversity-oriented approach should be explored because it is congruent with the recently inclusive educational trend, which is deemed to result in an equally grand opportunity for more collaboration and more individuals to thrive (NASEM, 2024; Nguyen & Huynh, 2024). This also aligns with the commonly perceived message "No one left behind" encouragingly practiced in Vietnam. With that in mind, the present study is to purposefully diversify groupings in an EFL speaking skill course. By the end of the scheduled course, this study aims to provide answers to two set questions:

(1) What are the effects of the diverse groupings on involved students' English speaking skills?

(2) What are typical patterns of preference among these students regarding diverse groupings implemented in the target speaking course?

2. Literature review

2.1. Theoretical framework

Group/pair work involving two to five members applied in the classroom stems primarily from the social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986). According to this theory, the human learning process is shaped by interplaying the dynamics of people, the environment, and behaviors in social contexts. In this perspective, people are active agents who both receive the environmental impacts by observing others' behaviors (especially linguistic acts, i.e. speaking). In return, people will impact the ongoing environment through their specific actions/behaviors (also, basically in a speaking manner) towards knowledge construction. It, therefore, formulates a reciprocal or collaborative learning ground and knowledge acquisition. In such a socially interactive learning synergy, it is deemed to tacitly establish the *zone of proximal development* (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978). The ZPD theory denotes that in social interactions (group work, for example) individuals develop better with the substantively ample guidance

of more competent people (such as teachers or peers) than when these individuals work alone (i.e., without any assistance or support from others).

Collectively, the two learning-driving theories typically underscore social contexts for fostering interactions and individuals' knowledge evolution. In other words, social interactions (classroom group/pair work is one of them) provide opportunities for people together to learn in some collaborative way via jointly discussing, conversing, making decisions, and so on, depending on specific situations or learning tasks given. However, for optimal learning achievements in group work, Johnson and Johnson (2018) maintained that five basic elements must be warranted. First, positive interdependence among group members is present. That is students share both tasks assigned and benefits yielded. Second, individual accountability is exercised in the sense that each member must make sufficient effort to fulfill his/her share of work and facilitate the work of other group members. Third, students promote each other's success by helping, assisting, praising, encouraging, and supporting each other to learn. Fourth, students are required to utilize social skills appropriately, including leadership, trust-building, communication, decision-making, and conflict-management skills. Finally, students together manage the group procession by monitoring and reflecting on the effectiveness of the process members use to maximize their own and each other's learning.

2.2. Previous studies

In the aforementioned framework, the spoken mode (i.e., language elements involved) is captured as a pivotal catalyst for the success of social interactions and mutual learning presence. Thus, an emerging number of studies have attested impacts of group work in EFL/ESL. Regarding the pairing method, the study by Basterrechea and Gallardo-del-Puerto (2020) involved EFL primary school students from Spain. The participants were paired into two types (1) free selection by students and (2) proficiency-matching by teachers. These formed pairs worked for about 30 minutes to create a meaningful story by arranging a set of given pictures. While they were working in pairs, all their spoken interactions were recorded. One of the major findings of this study is that the pairs of type (1) produced more meaning-based linguistic

elements (semantic aspects) and less form-based items (e.g., spelling, pronunciation, prepositions, or articles in English) than the pairing type (2). Similar results were also documented by other studies (Leeser, 2004; Garcia Mayo & Aguirre, 2019). However, these studies have yet to apply gender-grouping. In addition, various topics for diverse pairing members to discuss during the successive class sessions were not explored. Meanwhile, surveying 105 EFL high school teachers from Vietnam, the study by Do and Le (2020) found that the surveyed teachers highly credited group working as a productive technique to improve students' English speaking. Yet, observing four teachers running their English-speaking classes in practice, the researchers (*ibid*) revealed that all grouping methods (two members or more) were assigned by the teachers in charge. It appeared that diverse groupings were not deployed on purpose to facilitate English-speaking skills at high school.

Regarding the impacts on students' speaking skills via working collaboratively in groups, Sirisrimangkorn's (2021) project-based implementation was delivered to 31 Thai students of Business English attending a semester-long English course. As shaped by this Business English course, each 3-member group conducted a planned project guided by the in-charge teacher about project topics, procedure, data collection, language use, and other related; and then groups orally presented the project outcomes as scheduled. This project-based study recorded participants' improved English speaking skills resulting from collaborative group work during the project operation. In addition, they improved their presentational ability as each group was required to orally showcase the project results with PowerPoint slides used at the end of the course. In a similar research line of EFL/ESL education, other investigations such as Kemaloglu-Er (2022), Kettanun (2015), Treesattayanmunee and Baharudin (2024), John (2017), Pham et al. (2024); Sakae (2022), and Wathyudin (2017) mostly shared the project/task-execution effects enhancing participants' English verbal competence (including communication skills, English writing, vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation). From these studies, positive effects added are increased critical thinking, collaboration,

autonomy, and time management skills. However, in these studies of project-based learning, issues of diverse groupings on purpose and participants' voices of preferences over peer interactions were still absent.

Apart from its strengths, collaborative learning in group work has also produced several disadvantages (for further information, see Do & Le, 2020; John, 2017). Basterrechea and Gallardo-del-Puerto (2020) indicated that problematic pair work likely occurs in the following types of interaction (a) *dominant/dominant* - that is high equality but low collaboration; although contributing to the given task, pairs do not reach an agreement easily; (b) *dominant/passive* - the quality of equality and collaboration are low because one of the members controls the discussion progression with little mutual negotiation; (c) *expert/novice* - recording low equality but high mutual engagement because the expert or more capable member controls the progression but invites the novice peer (less capable) to make contributions. Thus, group work applied in school settings should take these notions into consideration and teachers should adequately "intervene in malfunctioning groups to improve their effectiveness" (Johnson & Johnson, 2018, p. 9).

3. Methods

3.1. Participants

The present study was conducted at a public university in Vietnam. Participants were 48 freshmen majoring in EFL who took part in an English-speaking course 2 (coded EN4120), officially scheduled at the university (Second semester, 2023/2024 academic year). In the previous semester, these freshmen already finished English Speaking course 1 but did not have explicit experience working with different peers from their speaking class, nor had they together worked on group/team projects. In general terms, typical speaking courses aiming to enhance learners' English skills are compulsory in the EFL major curriculum at this university. These listening-speaking classes (as required and officially approved by the faculty Dean) cover a variety of topics/themes as prompts for students to communicate using the English language. A speaking-skill coursebook is accompanied for content reference with readings, listening, and exercises. These participants were

between 18 – 20 years old, 36 females and 12 males. They were Vietnamese-speaking with an English command typically of a lower intermediate level because they all graduated from high school, where English was one of their core subjects during their three years of high school (VMOET, 2018). Thus, the participants as a homogeneous group (in terms of their first language of Vietnamese, educational background, age, and English proficiency) made up a convenience sampling for the present study (Bhattacharjee, 2012; Creswell, 2014; Soundy, 2024). As such, the strength of result generalizability is limited in comparison to that of the random sampling. However, the convenience approach in educational settings like the one in the present study is backed up by the argument on the essential involvement of the researcher in the process: "From the psychological and philosophical assumption that reality is created by way of construction, one can assume that researchers cannot understand human action by an outside observation which sees merely the physical manifestations of these activities" (Shkedi, 2019, p. 10).

3.2. Course intervention procedure

An English-speaking skills course of 15 weeks (a weekly 100-minute session) was consecutively run by the researcher-teacher in the present study. To increase the validity of the course intervention, the researcher consulted two supervisors, an EFL expert and the Division Leader from the faculty. Thus, one month before the course's commencement, three of us (the researcher and supervisors) met in person and deliberately conversed over the intervention procedure based on the course objectives, topic contents, allotted duration, and the characteristics of the participants. In the end, we came up with the course procedure as seen in Table 1.

Accordingly, every two weeks, students worked on one given topic with different partners assigned randomly by the teacher (first 6 weeks, and weeks 13 - 14); but at other times over the course, they were allowed to select their partners. For activities operated, from weeks 1 to 12 they followed a three-phase procedure, while in weeks 13 and 14 they conducted a group project. The course ended in week 15 of wrap-up talks.

Table 1. Weekly topic-based activities of diverse groupings

Week	Groupings	Topics	Activities
1 - 2	The teacher assigns randomly: Same-gender, two members per group (male-male; female-female)	Methods of English learning at college (as an EFL major)	<i>*Phase 1:</i> Under the teacher's detailed guidance on the working procedure, requirements, and outcomes expected, groups start to deliberately read, and mine the given coursebook, working on given exercises for gaining topic-relevant information/ knowledge, and ideas assimilated; outlining and planning a collaborative speech to deliver in front of the class in the following class session;
3 - 4	The teacher assigns: different genders: three members per group of one male and two females (since there are more females than males in this class)	Employment (choosing a career: requirements, challenges, and opportunity for development)	<i>*Phase 2:</i> The next week's session, groups self-search available resources and references to generate a complete speech; and rehearse the speech before presenting it in class;
5 - 6	The teacher assigns an English proficiency gap via one stronger, more active + one weaker, less active.	Cultures & Holidays (typical social, family activities; personal enjoyments)	<i>*Phase 3:</i> groups take turns delivering the prepared speech, followed by hearing and responding to feedback, and comments from other groups and the teacher.
7 - 8	Students freely select one same-gender partner	Food & Health issues (strategies to stay well)	
9 - 10	Students freely select one different-gender partner in groups of 3 or 4	Relationships (family, friends)	
11 - 12	Students freely form their groups of 3 or 4	Technologies in modern life	
13 - 14	The teacher assigns groups of 3 or 4 (mixed gender and English proficiency)	Local landmarks (potentials for tourism development)	- <i>A group project;</i> each group yielded a 5-10 minute video clip featuring one local landmark to openly release to the whole class (using English speaking skills).
15	Wrap-up talks	Reflecting on group activities	- Students voice their attitudes towards group workings over the entire semester, highlighting gains, downsides, and suggestions for improvement. - They also complete the given questionnaire on a free-will basis (i.e., they could decline to take part in the questionnaire survey).

3.3. Instruments for data collection

As seen from Table 1, at week 15 students completed a relevant questionnaire following the wrap-up talks. The wrap-up talks were driven by the following six questions (assigned by the researcher), creating an equal space for all participants to freely speak out their ideas, opinions, preferences, and problems (if any) over the speaking course featured

by diverse groupings towards completing informed assignments. The question prompts were orderly and structured as follows:

1. Could you list some typical benefits from group interactions in English speaking skills?
2. Do you prefer self-selecting partners in group work or willingly working with partners chosen by the teacher?

3. Do you prefer working with the same or various partners throughout the entire semester? Why?

4. Do you prefer working with partners of similar English proficiency or mixed English levels (very good, good, and fair)? Why?

5. Do you prefer working with partners of the same or mixed sex? Why?

6. Do you feel more confident in English speaking in class or in public now than before?

For more thoughtful ideas recorded better, all participants were asked to release their relevant ideas in audio files and then sent to the researcher one week later. Qualitative/nonmetric data based on these audio recordings of questions from 2 to 5 would provide valid evidence for the second research question in the present study (i.e., what are typical patterns of preference among these students regarding diverse groupings implemented in the target speaking course?). In addition, questions 1 and 6 were aimed to seek responses on how individual participants evaluated the effects of the course intervention, thus allowing for a cross-check on the findings from the questionnaire survey.

Meanwhile, the questionnaire survey used in this study was framed to provide quantitative/metric data to the first research question: What are the effects of the diverse groupings on involved students' English speaking skills? Accordingly, building on the relevant literature as addressed above (Basterrechea & Gallardo-del-Puerto, 2020; Do & Le, 2020; John, 2017; Johnson & Johnson, 2018; Pham et al., 2024), and the first research question, the questionnaire contents would focus on the effects brought about to participants under diverse groupings implemented in the present study. At first, the researcher designed 22 items falling into three major components of effect: (1) English proficiency comprising eight items; (2) cognitive skills, seven items; and (3) social skills, seven items. However, after being reviewed by the two supervisors (EFL expert and Division Leader) and piloted among 20 freshmen (not included in the present study), for its better content validity, the questionnaire was truncated with 15 items as seen in Table 2 below. Thus, seven items (e.g., *Practicing English speaking with classmates is necessary for EFL majors*; *Practicing English speaking with*

classmates in person/face-to-face is more effective than online) were deleted because they did not directly serve the objective of the first research question. Moreover, deleting seven items also helped increase the ratio of respondent-variable from 48/22 to 48/15 for the sampling strength of the present study (Hair et al., 2014). For the participant's response denoted, each item was followed by a 5-point range, scaling from "Absolutely agree" = 5 points to "Absolutely disagree" = 1 point.

3.4. Data analysis

Quantitative data collected from the questionnaire survey was processed by the software SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences, version 26). The obtained scale reliability is α : 0.971, thus securing the data validity for further analysis and interpretation. In addition, KMO-Bartlett's test (i.e., Measure of Sampling Adequacy/MSA) was run. The result was .829 at the significance level of Sig=.000. Furthermore, the Component Analysis indicated that all indicators/items in the scale were above 0.600 values. Therefore, the scale was adequate (Hair et al., 2014; Hair et al., 2021).

For qualitative data, directed by the notion that "It is the researcher who codes, conceptualizes, and theorizes the data" (Timonen et al., 2018, p. 8), the present researcher first examined all the submitted audio recordings (one by one) to ensure that their contents were valid, i.e., being based on the six question prompts given by the researcher in the classroom. The result was all the recordings were adequate. Next, the audio-transcription/verbatim was transferred into the written format for subsequent steps of coding and categorizing the data into themes as units of detailed content analysis (Bhattacharjee, 2012; Creswell, 2014; Shkedi, 2019; Timonen et al., 2018). Given the objective of the qualitative data was to provide evidence for the second research question, themes in this case were represented by the six question prompts as mentioned above. After the analytical process, all the data and initial analysis results were sent to the two supervisors for cross-checking as independent auditors/inter-raters (Bhattacharjee, 2012). One week later, the researcher and the supervisors met for an in-depth discussion on the analysis results. We worked on a case-by-case basis linked with the themes captured in six prompts. We focused particularly on those points of

disagreement among us and kept on discussing until a consensus was reached on all the cases.

On research-ethic concerns, after obtaining the participants' consent openly, anonymity (i.e., no real name or privacy about the participants was revealed) has been strictly applied in the process of analyzing these valid data and reporting results. In addition, this study closely complies with the university's present research regulations regarding the operational procedure, related resources, and research ethics. The next section will present the results in detail.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Quantitative data results

The detailed results are shown in Table 2 with the means and standard deviations (SD) for each and all 15 effects (i.e., 15 variables in statistical research terms) embraced in the questionnaire scale used in the present study. These computed effects are drawn on participants' self-rating responses to diverse groupings applied in the intervention procedure. The effects/variables are grouped into three sets of skills in order: English proficiency, cognitive, and social.

Table 2. Effects of diverse grouping practice

Practicing topic-based activities of diverse groupings helps ...		Means	SD	Number
English proficiency	1 - improve English speaking skills	4.65	0.526	48
	2 - improve English listening skills	4.63	0.531	48
	3 - increase self-confidence in speaking English	4.63	0.570	48
	4 - reduce anxiety in speaking English	4.60	0.536	48
	5 - refine English pronunciation	4.50	0.715	48
	6 - solidify English grammar	4.33	0.834	48
	7 - improve English speaking fluency	4.50	0.684	48
Cognitive skills	8 - train critical thinking	4.50	0.684	48
	9 - organize and present opinions reasonably	4.60	0.610	48
	10 - look at issues discussed better from various perspectives	4.56	0.580	48
	11 - understand better about your strengths and weaknesses	4.40	0.707	48
Social skills	12 - respect others' ideas and views	4.54	0.683	48
	13 - improve confidence in social interactions	4.48	0.652	48
	14 - learn how to keep on good terms with others	4.50	0.652	48
	15 - train adaptive skills in different working environments	4.50	0.619	48

Drawing on the mean values seen in Table 2, all effects are self-rated by the participants at a high value, over 4 points out of 5, coupled with all SD values of no more than $0.834 < 1$ (effect 6), i.e., a low value. Since the standard deviation (SD) is the variance/distribution or range of individual values relative to the mean value of a given variable (Bhattacharjee, 2012; Hair et al., 2014), a low value of SD indicates the range of individual values is convergently narrow (closely clustered around the mean value) among empirical observations for the given variable.

Thus, a high mean value and a low SD in this case suggest that all 48 participants convergently and highly valued the practices of diverse groupings provided by the present speaking course. That said, they acknowledged the positive effects on their

three sets of skills given, resulting from the target intervention initiated in the present study. Topping the list are those target effects of English proficiency, speaking (1) and listening (2) with the smallest SDs of 0.526 and 0.531, respectively. Coming next are the effects of 3, 4, and 6. Many of these positive effects confirm the presumed values of *social cognitive* and ZPD theories as mentioned above concerning EFL education, where learners mutually work and cognitively benefit each other in various aspects. Therefore, it could be concluded that the course intervention of diverse groupings applied in the present study appears to generate positive effects on the involved students' English speaking skills as well as cognitive and social skills. However, it should be noted that although all the relevant effects were anchored by the intervention under discussion,

other activities (such as English speaking club) in which participants took part during the intervention to facilitate their speaking skills had not been controlled. Consequently, this is a limitation of the present study but it is also a marked point for further research to take into account.

On the other hand, these positive findings in the present study mirror most of the past investigations' results related to group/pair work within the EFL field (John, 2017; Kettanun, 2015; Pham et al., 2024; Sakae, 2022; Sirisrimangkorn, 2021; Treesattayanmune & Baharudin, 2024; Wathyudin, 2017). The present questionnaire scale, however, accommodates several beneficial effects that have yet to be found in the aforementioned studies, namely those covering from 10 to 15 displayed in Table 2. The present study argues that these cognitive-social skills are significant educational values for personal and professional development in the 21st century, training and directing students "to become responsible and engaged citizens in Vietnamese society and the international community" (Nguyen & Huynh, 2024, p. 54). Furthermore, these crucial classroom-transcending skills have been successfully activated and yielded fruits alongside those of EFL communication via diverse grouping practices over the entire academic semester on purpose.

4.2. Qualitative data results

As mentioned earlier, qualitative data were collected from the audio recordings submitted by participants after the completion of the course. The next part will display the findings in the order of six themes corresponding to the six question prompts given above. Accordingly, theme 01 describes the respondents/Res' overall evaluations of the beneficial effects of the course intervention. Themes 02 to 05 denote the Res' differing patterns of preference for English-speaking practices with peers. Meanwhile, theme 06 serves as a confirmation by the Res for an increase in his/her English-speaking confidence.

4.2.1. Theme 01: Typical benefits perceived

All the respondents (100%) strongly confirmed the benefits of practicing English speaking with various peers over the speaking course. They all underscored the necessity of interacting with peers in English at college (especially for EFL majors) because for them it helped improve speaking-listening

skills, enrich vocabulary, and detect and fix mistakes in English pronunciation, intonation, and grammar. For instance, Res 5 recounted that:

While learning in high school before, I rarely had the opportunity to practice English communicatively. But, the university environment here is different. It has provided me with many more opportunities to practice English speaking with different classmates, especially in speaking classes like this one. Therefore, it helps me enhance my listening and speaking skills in English by recognizing and correcting my errors in English pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammatical structures. I will continue to proactively make the optimal use of this English learning environment to perfect my English.

For affective aspects, many of them also referred to their increased self-confidence and less anxiety, shyness, or avoidance tactics in English interactions in and outside the classroom (Res 3, 6, 11, 17, 23, 26, 30, etc.). This finding is well-aligned with what has been seen in Table 1 regarding the positive effects brought to the participants, especially those of English proficiency.

4.2.2. Theme 02: Preference for self-selection versus teacher-assignment partners

More than half of the respondents preferred self-selecting partners because this approach helped them feel more relaxed working with those of the same background, intimacy, and interests (cited by Res 1, 2, 6, 7, 8, 10, etc.). Meanwhile, the rest revealed that they were willing to work with any partners because they preferred something new, unprecedented, or happening by chance (Res 4, 5, 9, 11, 12, 13, etc.). Some also said that the assigned-partner approach rather than the self-selection would train their adaptive skills to work in diverse environments. For instance, Res 18 posited that "Teachers should assign partners so that students can have the opportunity to work with various students". Interestingly, Res. 24 visioned that "In the future when working in a company, I will unlikely have the right to choose with whom I will work. So working with various partners as assigned will train my adaptive skills and coping tactics." On the contrary, Res 9 argued that "I prefer self-selection so that I can choose the best partner to gain the best learning outcomes".

Consequently, in this regard of learning groupings perceived by students' voices, balancing student selection and teacher decision as done in the present study appears to be sensible. Teacher-decision grouping is also congruent with providing some types of linguistic risk for students to benefit themselves by getting out of their normal comfort zone for adventure, novelty, and learning (Al-Obaydi, 2020; Slavkov, 2023), especially when these students are young adults.

4.2.3. Theme 03: Preference for single versus various partners

Like those responses found in theme 02, responses for theme 03 fell into two opposing directions. However, more than 50% expressed their preference for having the opportunity to work with different partners (i.e., changing partners a couple of times over the semester) because it provided diversity, leading to different views on problems/issues under discussion; thereby, various ideas or solutions came out, which is the way to foster creativity in problem-solving tactics (Res 4, 5, 9, 10, 11, 12, etc.). For example, Res 37 indicated that *"Communicating with different people, we can learn many strong points from them because no two minds are entirely identical"*. In particular, this way helped avoid a possible feeling of reduced attention and engagement, which was given by Res 45, who insisted that *"Novelty in meeting and talking with various partners will catch more attention and sustainable engagement than working with the same people for a long time"*.

In the opposite direction, three main reasons for the zone of ease, safety, stability, and long-standing relationships, are given to the preference of keeping on same partnerships over the whole semester. Res 32 expressed that *"Intimacy among close friends helps me feel more comfortable, safer, and confident than speaking with new partners even in the classroom"*. This particular finding has yet to be explicitly addressed in previous relevant studies (John, 2017; Kettanun, 2015; Pham et al., 2024; Sakae, 2022; Sirisrimangkorn, 2021; Treesattayanmune & Baharudin, 2024; Wathyudin, 2017). The finding is useful for today's school practitioners (EFL ones included) tailoring their structured activities of groupings to learners of diverse preferences and learning styles. The present study as seen above is one alternative for diverse groupings.

4.2.4. Theme 04: Preference for the same versus mixed-proficiency partners

Unlike a nearly 50-50 separation found in themes 02 and 03, theme 04 was picked up by a large majority of respondents opting for mixed levels of English proficiency. The fact that those with better English resources would likely help other members is the primary explanation given among them. Noticeably, Res 12 stated that *"Working with stronger peers, the weaker would self-detect their weaknesses and try their best to keep up with others"*, meaning that the weaker were more motivated by the stronger to learn for improvement. This finding reflects the social cognitive theory as well as the ZPD theory (Bandura, 1986; Vygotsky, 1978). This finding also renders another signal for EFL teachers. By common sense, after a couple of beginning sessions, teachers can mostly match learners with differing levels of English proficiency. Such professional sensitivity will help teachers bring substantial benefits to students when it comes to group/pair work. However, some (Res 19, 25, 40, 45, etc.) mentioned the incidence of dominance by stronger students and no or little opportunity for weaker ones to express themselves. This finding is somewhat aligned with the problematic type of dominant/passive interaction as addressed earlier (Basterrechea & Gallardo-del-Puerto, 2020). Consequently, to fix possible problems in time it is worth that *"EFL teachers should be well aware of and get prepared to deal with them promptly and rationally by taking on multiple roles as being not only a planner, organizer, observer and evaluator but director, motivator, and supporter in case problems somehow occur"* (Do & Le, 2020, p. 448).

4.2.5. Theme 05: Preference for the same versus mixed-sex partners

Only a few respondents opted for same-sex choice because they would feel more intimate and confident in expressing themselves. Meanwhile, up to 90% of the respondents preferred mixed sex because they perceived that females and males approached issues or problems given in dissimilar perspectives, looking from comprehensive angles; thus, it would broaden the mind. They also cited, *"Today men and women are equal; this doesn't matter anymore"* (Res.1, 7, 9, 13, and so on). On the one hand, this finding offers evidence of current college students'

open mindset concerning sex subjects; on the other hand, this mindset pattern would likely foster stronger relationships and social skills of communicative interactions at large, not just in English learning. Thus, it sounds sensible for teachers to attend to this point by exercising pair/group work to sharpen the awareness of equity and collaboration among college students for mutual growth (NASEM, 2024; Nguyen & Huynh, 2024; VMOET, 2018).

4.2.6. Theme 06: Confirmation of an increase in English-speaking confidence

Like the result of theme 01, a 100% positive response was found in theme 06. Although all respondents said “yes”, those who preferred speaking English with a wide variety of peers in and outside the classroom of casual encounters, or extra-curricular ones (such as English speaking clubs, speaking contests, and Gala Night held by the Faculty frequently over the school year) appeared to demonstrate stronger confidence in English interactions (Res.2, 5, 14, 19, etc.). They tended to proactively express themselves in English in a comfortable manner. For example, Res 30 delivered that:

I have been actively engaged in speaking English with different classmates, especially in this speaking course. In comparison with the first semester of my first year, I now feel much more confident in my English communication skills. Probably, that’s why in some recent group works I have been assigned as the group leader, both in English and non-English classes. Thus, I frankly encourage other students to actively take part in English-speaking activities with partners regardless of age or English proficiency as long as they appear to speak English communicatively and collaboratively.

On the contrary, some humbly said that they should practice speaking English more to overcome shyness, anxiety, mistake fear, and avoidance in communicative social contacts (Res.1, 7, 10, 13, etc.). Res 20 acknowledged that “*Yes, I feel a little more confident now to speak English than before, but I have to keep trying to reduce my trait of shyness in social communication*”.

Once again, although all respondents confirmed an increase in their English-speaking confidence of differing degrees, this result should not be attributed only to the intervention under discussion applied in

the present study. Other activities outside the formal classroom like English speaking clubs could play a part as well in this regard. Thus, further research should attempt to capture how much extra-curricular activities of peer interactions impact students’ English speaking skills in comparison to those scheduled in the classroom.

4.3. Implications

Collectively, the present study (based on findings from the quantitative and qualitative data) upholds the positive effects resulting from peer interactions in the forms of pair/group work documented in past research (John, 2017; Kettanun, 2015; Pham et al., 2024; Sakae, 2022; Sirisrimangkorn, 2021; Treesattayanmune & Baharudin, 2024; Wathyudin, 2017). This frequently used approach favorably fosters EFL learners’ English proficiency and speaking-listening skills in particular. It also develops their cognitive and social skills as reported above. The present study argues that in affordable conditions of EFL learning at college, classroom teachers should intentionally implement diverse groupings by sometimes over the course assigning different group members of mixed English proficiency and sex better than retaining the same partnerships. Diverse grouping is encouraged especially when a single speaking course typically has to cover several learning topics/themes spanning the entire semester. This instructional technique is not only to avoid the one-fits-all method but also aligned with the approach to effectively serve different patterns of preference in learning among students as evidenced by the findings from the second research question above. This approach reflects the core nature of learner-centeredness because it pays attention to learner diversity. Moreover, diverse grouping in peer interactions offers positive risks for learners to train adaptivities, and coping tactics for unprecedented confrontations, and to “discover new and creative ways of practicing that language in authentic settings outside of the classroom” (Slavkov, 2023, p. 52) as present and future life likely holds in reality. Particularly, given that one of the supervisors for this study is the current Division Leader (EFL) of the Foreign Languages Faculty at the University, the above findings would provide him and the faculty with some alternatives to innovative teaching methods.

5. Conclusion

By intentionally applying diverse groupings of mixed English proficiency, sex, partner self-selection, and teacher assignment at biweekly intervals over the 15-week speaking skill course, the present study demonstrates positive effects on participants' speaking-listening skills (English pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar included), cognitive, and social skills. This study made it different from past pertinent inquiries by uncovering typical patterns of EFL students' preference in working on collaborative group/pair learning tasks regarding English proficiency levels, sex, partnership selection, and working duration. On the one hand, the results are added to the existing EFL literature; on the other, pedagogical implications are thereby generated for classroom practices when it comes to peer interactions in English-speaking classes. This is deemed to bring another dynamic to the language-learning classroom.

As already mentioned above, what has been found by the present study is somehow limited due to its small-size convenience sampling and short temporal operation. In addition, the researcher was unable to control what other activities outside the class sessions (e.g., English speaking club) participants took part in to facilitate their English speaking. As a consequence, for stronger warrants and generalization values, more future research in this line is encouraged. Specifically, the template procedure of diverse groupings could be replicated with a larger sample at different colleges or universities in Vietnam and other countries. Also, academic performances via regular forms of pretests and posttests should be included to attest concrete academic gains. These issues in rigorous inquiries will beneficially update our understanding of how EFL learners currently perceive and practice English speaking skills with peers and others alike. Thereby, we can frequently modify teaching methods better tailored to their diverse needs and interests.

Acknowledgments: This research was supported by the scientific and technological topic of Dong Thap University under the code SPD2021.01.21.

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