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Author/s:

Storch, N;Zhao, H;Morton, J

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Multiple perspectives on group work in a multilingual context

Neomy Storch, Helen Zhao, and Janne Morton
The University of Melbourne

Group assignments are widely used in higher education for a range of educational reasons. Although there is a large body of research on the merits of group work and factors that may contribute to successful group work, less is known about students' and teachers' perspectives, particularly when groups are composed of students from diverse linguistic backgrounds. The current qualitative study investigated students' and teachers' perspectives on group assignments in a Master of Applied Linguistics program offered by a leading research university in Australia. The program has predominantly English as an additional language (EAL) students. Teachers and students in four graduate subjects that involved group assignments were interviewed for their views and reflections. Analysis of the interview data revealed similarities and differences in perspectives in five main areas – group work benefits and challenges, group formation and assessment, and the need for pre-implementation training. The findings highlight the need for teachers to promote open discussion about the purposes and merits of group work, both pedagogical and social.

Keywords: cooperative learning, group work, group formation, EAL students

1. Introduction

In higher education, group work is a ubiquitous instructional and assessment activity across a diverse range of disciplines such as marketing, sociology, psychology, and education, including second language instruction. The broad rationale for using group work is similar across these disciplines. Group work is said to confer many learning benefits (see Davies, 2009), but perhaps the most often mentioned are exposure to different ideas and the opportunity to learn how to negotiate and resolve differences (e.g., Nokes-Malaches, Richey, & Gadgil, 2015). The development of effective negotiation skills seems particularly important in an

increasingly globalized and diverse world. However, it is clear that simply assigning students to work in groups does not ensure effective and productive group work (e.g., Brown & McIlory, 2011; De Hei et al., 2018; Judd, Kennedy, & Cropper, 2010; Storch, 2013).

A review of the literature suggests that the predominant theory underpinning group work across all levels of education is cooperative learning. Leading researchers on cooperative learning (e.g., Johnson & Johnson, 1989, 2009; Johnson et al., 2014), have long argued that the educational and social gains of group work occur only when students form cooperative groups. The researchers draw on the theory of social interdependence to argue that there are two essential and inter-related conditions for group learning success: positive interdependence and individual accountability. Group interdependence can be positive, negative, or non-existent. Positive interdependence means that members of a group share a cooperative goal structure and each member feels accountable for the group outcome. Each individual in such groups feels a responsibility not only to complete their share of the work but also to facilitate the work of other group members by sharing resources and encouraging other members to contribute to the joint task. In other words, in such groups there is a high level of promotive interaction. In contrast, negative interdependence describes a competitive goal structure with each group member perceiving that their goals can be achieved only if other members fail to attain their goals, and thus may actively obstruct access to information. A lack of social interdependence, or an individualistic goal structure, means that members of a group strive to achieve their own goals without regard for others' goals, and in such groups there is little or no interaction. Thus, positive interdependence (a cooperative goal structure) provides an explanatory mechanism for successful group work, linking the nature of goals, interaction, and achievement.

Extensive research on cooperative learning has shown that in order to encourage groups to develop positive interdependence and a sense of accountability to group goals, certain factors need to be considered when designing and implementing group work. These factors relate to group size, group formation, approach to assessment, and prior training. In terms of group size and the need for training, there seems to be consensus in the literature. Researchers agree that groups should not be too large (e.g., Bacon, 2005; Wheelan, 2009). Large groups encourage a diffused sense of individual accountability and a possible abrogation of individual responsibility, a phenomenon referred to as 'social loafing' or 'free riding'. Most researchers also suggest that the implementation of group projects should be preceded by some form of training. Johnson and Johnson (2009, 2013), among others, highlight the importance of pre-training sessions which empha-

size the benefits of positive group work and teach students effective social skills, including learning how to deal with conflict.

More contentious are decisions regarding assessing group projects and how best to form groups. Proponents of cooperative learning recommend awarding a group grade to encourage positive interdependence (Johnson & Johnson, 1999). Others suggest that this group grade should be supplemented with an individual grade given by the teacher or by peers (e.g., Fellenz, 2006; Walker, 2002). The inclusion of individual or peer grades is thought to discourage ‘social loafing’ and thus fairer as it takes into consideration individual group members’ input. However, the inclusion of an individual grade may create some tensions within the group. For example, in Walker’s (2002) study, students held the view that the inclusion of a peer assessment element may negatively impact group cohesion and create disharmony.

The most contentious issue in the literature about group work is group formation. There are two overlapping issues here – whether teachers or students should be responsible for deciding group membership and whether culturally heterogeneous or homogeneous groups work best. Some scholars (e.g., Johnson & Johnson, 1999; Nokes-Malaches et al., 2015) suggest that teachers should determine group membership to ensure that the groups formed are heterogeneous so that students are exposed to diverse perspectives. A number of studies, however, report that culturally diverse groups tend to have lower grades compared to culturally homogeneous groups (e.g., Chapman et al., 2006; Cheng, Armatas, & Wang, 2020). It also seems that students, when asked, overwhelmingly prefer to self-select group members (e.g., Mahenthiran & Rouse, 2000; Strauss, U, & Young, 2011) and that students in self-selected groups are more positive about their experience than their counterparts in teacher assigned groups (Chapman et al., 2006). Seethamraju and Borman (2009) argue that students might well have greater insight into the desirable characteristics of fellow group members than their teachers. Hinds et al. (2000) observe that homogeneity may foster a greater sense of trust and reciprocity among group members.

Indeed, a number of studies have reported feelings of distrust and resentment about group work experiences amongst groups composed of linguistically diverse students (e.g., Cruickshank, Chen, & Warren, 2012; Leki, 2001, 2007; Strauss, U, & Young, 2011; Summers & Volet, 2008). For example, Leki’s (2001, 2007) ethnographic study documented international EAL students’ sense of disempowerment in group projects with English as a first language (L1) peers. The six EAL participants in Leki’s (2001) longitudinal study reported that their contributions to the group work were not valued and often ignored by their English L1 peers. Summers and Volet’s (2008) cross-sectional study found that monolingual English L1 students were more negative in their attitudes towards working in multi-

cultural groups than EAL students. Furthermore, the study found that students' attitudes towards culturally mixed group work did not become more positive over their three years of university study. Recent newspaper articles (e.g., Laurie, 2019) echo these findings. Laurie (2019), a graduate student at a large metropolitan university in Australia, reports on the frustrations experienced by English L1 students who feel that they have to act as "unpaid tutors" in group projects, helping their EAL peers to understand and complete the set group task.

In the university sector in many English-speaking countries, international EAL students now form a large proportion of the student cohort. Yet, as Hennerbry and Fordyce (2018) argue, there is relatively little research on the experience of higher degree students in group work in multi-cultural settings. Our study forms part of a larger research project which investigated how our predominantly EAL students experienced group work across a range of subjects in one graduate program when working with students from the same or different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, including English L1 speakers.

In order to get a broader perspective on group assignments, we also elicited the views of the other key players in the educational context: the teachers who design and assess the group projects. Our study thus set out to investigate and to compare students' and teachers' perspectives and their reflections on group assignments in a multilingual context. Our ultimate aim is to identify how we can maximize the learning and social opportunities that these group projects offer all our students. The research questions guiding this study were:

1. What are students' views about their experience of participating in a group assignment?
2. What are teachers' views and reflections on group assignments that they implemented in their subjects?

2. Methodology

2.1 Setting and participants

The current study was carried out in a Master of Applied Linguistics program in a major public university in Australia. The study was exploratory and thus adopted a qualitative research design, setting out to gain a better understanding of participants' experiences and perspectives. Data were collected over a period of one semester from four Master subjects that involved group assignments. The subjects were Second Language Acquisition (SLA) (52 enrolments), Second Language Writing (SLW) (84 enrolments), Bilingualism (Biling) (103 enrolments), and Language Testing (LT) (80 enrolments). For three of the subjects (SLA, SLW,

Biling), the group assignment was optional and was a research project requiring students to collect and analyse data. The students in these subjects self-selected group members and formed small groups of 2–3 students. The group assignment in LT was mandatory and required students to design and pilot a test. The groups were teacher assigned, with larger groups of 4–5 students.

Across the four subjects, all six academic staff involved in designing and/or grading the assignments participated in the study. All were regular research and teaching staff in the program and were experienced in teaching Master-level subjects in applied linguistics. Eleven student groups comprising a total of 30 students volunteered to participate (see Table 1). The majority of the student participants were on-campus, with only two studying online. The study obtained ethics approval from the researchers' institution (Ethics ID: 1954044). Participation in the study was voluntary. Participants received a plain language statement, describing in detail what participation in the study involved, and signed a consent form.

Table 1. Student group compositions

Subject	Group No.	Group size	Language backgrounds
SLA	1	2	All Chinese
	2	2	All Chinese
SLW	1	3	All Chinese
	2	3	All Chinese
	3	2	All Chinese
Biling	1	2	1 Korean, 1 English L1 speaker
	2	2	All Chinese
	3	2	All Chinese
LT	1	4	2 Indonesian, 1 Chinese, 1 Cantonese-English bilingual (online student)
	2	4	3 Chinese, 1 English L1 speaker (online student)
	3	4	2 Chinese, 1 Thai-English bilingual, 1 English L1 speaker

2.2 Instruments

The main instrument of the study was a semi-structured interview carried out individually with the teaching staff and student participants (see Appendix). The interviews were audio-recorded and elicited views and attitudes towards general

and current group assignments (benefits, challenges, suggestions), instruction (assessment, group formation), process and arrangements, and division of labour. Of the six teachers who were interviewed, one was interviewed at the beginning of the semester because he designed the subject but no longer taught it and five were interviewed at the end of the semester to elicit their observations and reflections about the success or otherwise of these assignments.

Student interviews were carried out at the end of semester after the assignment was submitted but before it was assessed. The interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes. Three students did not participate in the interviews and the interview data of one student proved inaudible, thus the interview data of only 26 students were usable. Other sources of data were collected in the larger study, but the current article focuses only on the interview data.

2.3 Data analysis

All interviews were transcribed and analysed thematically, grouping similar responses. Coding categories were developed for the teacher interviews and student interviews respectively. The main themes that emerged in the teacher interviews were: (1) benefits of group assignments; (2) decisions to make when implementing group assignments; (3) assessment; (4) pre-implementation training; (5) challenges; and (6) strategies to deal with challenges. The data were analysed inductively, identifying fine-grained themes within the main themes until saturation was reached (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005). The same procedure applied to the coding of the student interviews, through which we identified the following main themes: (1) attitudes towards group assignments (general and on reflection); (2) opinions regarding group formation; (3) assessment; and (4) pre-implementation training. We paid particular attention to the views of students in linguistically diverse groups.

For comparison purposes, we used the same overarching classification scheme for teacher and student comments on benefits and challenges of group-work. This consisted of four main sub-categories: pragmatic (related to time and efficiency), learning or achievement related (e.g., exposure to new ideas, opportunities to engage in discussion often resulting in a better/stronger project); personal (e.g., increased motivation, confidence) and social or interpersonal (e.g., learning to negotiate, establishing friendships).

3. Results

3.1 Teachers' perspectives on group work

The interview data revealed that the teachers were clear as to the benefits of group work in terms of student achievement and learning gains. When asked for overall reflections, they observed that the quality of assignments was generally higher from groups than individuals (SLW, Biling, SLA), that weaker students produced better work in groups than they could have on their own (SLA), and that group work was particularly suited to postgraduate study (Biling). When we probed deeper, a range of reasons emerged.

The teachers' responses fell into three of the four sub-categories: pragmatic, learning/achievement, and social/interpersonal. Echoing previous research (e.g., Chapman et al., 2006; Fellenz, 2006; Nokes-Malaches et al., 2015), pragmatic and learning/achievement-related reasons were most common. Pragmatic reasons included concerns about time-saving for students (SLW, SLA, Biling, LT), whereas pedagogical reasons included the benefits of students learning how to scaffold peers (SLW), and preparation for research training, such as working with larger data sets (SLW, SLA, LT). Less well-covered in previous literature (but see Bacon, 2005), an important pragmatic reason for the teachers was related to their workloads – making the marking process more manageable in terms of quantity, especially with large groups of students (Biling, SLA) and more palatable in terms of interest and quality of assignments (SLA). Reasons we classified as 'interpersonal' included students learning how to contribute and understanding the value of different expertise (Biling), and the development of skills required to work successfully in teams, such as negotiation and coordination (SLW, SLA, LT).

As noted in previous literature, a number of decisions are involved in implementing group assignments. These include whether group work is optional or compulsory, optimal group size, how groups are formed, and how outcomes are assessed. For three of the subjects in this study, group work was optional, although strongly encouraged by the teachers, with students self-selecting their group. The rationale the teachers provided for self-selection was that students exercising this choice were more likely to cooperate with group members and avoid conflict (SLA). Language Testing was the only subject with compulsory group work (with individual assignments available only for compelling reasons). Groups were teacher-assigned, but a complex procedure allowing movement between groups if desired seemed to acknowledge the challenges this approach might bring. The rationale here was mixing of on-campus and online students, and those with varying abilities, but common interests. In terms of group size, fairness of assessment criteria was the reason given for the preference for smaller groups, with

pairs (Biling) or up to three in a group (SLA, SLW). The SLW teacher had previously allowed larger groups of 4–5 students, but stated her intention to go back to smaller groups to minimize ‘free riders.’ The Language Testing teacher justified larger groups of 4–5 students on the basis that this was a better reflection of team size in real world test development.

Issues around assessment were unresolved for the teachers we interviewed, especially in circumstances where group work was optional. Ongoing dilemmas focused on whether to adjust word restrictions, size of data set, or criteria for marking of individual versus group assignments. A policy of adjusting word limits to reflect the number of students in a group had been adopted in Biling and LT, and was planned to be implemented in the future for SLW due to student feedback. In SLA, on the other hand, the teacher expressed concern that varying word limits could potentially advantage group assignments. Other dilemmas included whether to award a group mark or include some recognition of individual contributions in the marking scheme. While in the current iteration, all teachers had chosen a group grade as “not ideal but workable” (LT), all expressed some reservations about the equity of this decision. Some reported ongoing experiments, including joint research but individually written papers (LT), students writing a summary of their contribution, but receiving a group mark (LT, SLA), and students indicating which sections of the paper they contributed to with marks allocated on this basis (LT); this last approach found to be impractical and problematic for students. There was some sense that expectations for assignments completed by individuals and group were different, with for example, a more in-depth analysis expected in group assignments (Biling), but these expectations did not seem to be explicitly reflected in criteria for assessment.

On the issue of preparation for group work, there was general consensus. The teachers agreed that instructions for group work should be explicitly described in task sheets, and if optional, students should be encouraged to opt for group work with its advantages (and even the disadvantages of individual work [Biling]) clearly spelt out in class (Cf. Storch, 2013). Whereas previous research in the field of group dynamics recommends dedicated prior instruction in skills for group work success, including in leadership (e.g., Bacon, Stewart, & Anderson, 2001; Leeming, 2019) and avoidance of conflict (e.g., Nokes-Malaches et al., 2015), there was no mention of such preparation sessions by the teacher participants in the current study. There was, however, an acknowledgement of both the need to emphasize mutual respect (Biling) and that a small percentage of groups would be affected by conflict arising from divergent goals and expectations (SLW, LT, SLA), which would likely require the teacher’s intervention (LT, Biling, SLW). It was also acknowledged that group decisions about the division of labour, such as adopting a strategy of parallel writing, might undermine the purpose of group

assignments. The possibility of a student contract set up at the start of the process, including commitments to attend group meetings and complete work on time was suggested by the SLA teacher as a solution to some of these issues (see also Kamau & Spong, 2015).

3.2 Students' perspectives on group work

In this section, we report and discuss students' perspectives on group work, including firstly, their attitudes to group work in general and what they perceived to be the main benefits and challenges based on previous experiences and then based on their reflections of their most recent group work experience. We then report on students' views concerning group formation, assessment, and the need for pre-assignment training in group work. When reporting our findings, we note how often a comment was made (participants often gave a number of reasons for holding a particular view) and also include illustrative excerpts from the transcribed interview data. The student excerpts are noted for the relevant subject (i.e., SLA, SLW, Biling, LT), group composition (i.e., homogenous or mixed background groups) and the student's linguistic background (i.e., EAL or English L1 speakers).

3.2.1 *Students' attitudes to group work*

Our interview data suggested that half of the students had some prior experience of working in groups, either in other subjects on the MA program or in their undergraduate degrees. The rest reported that they either had no prior experience or minimal experience. For example, some international EAL students referred to their experience in oral group discussion tasks in the EFL classes they completed prior to coming to Australia. When asked about their general attitudes to group work, only 50% (13/26) were positive, including five students who said that their attitudes depended on who they worked with. Two expressed no preference, and the others ($n=11$) expressed a preference for individual work, often based on negative experiences of group work in the past or on advice given by their peers.

There were thirty-three comments made by the students identifying the benefits of group work. As with the teacher interview data, these could be classified under four main sub-categories: pragmatic, learning or achievement related, personal, and social/ interpersonal. Also similar to the teacher data, pragmatic and learning related benefits of group work were mentioned most often in the student interviews. Among the pragmatic benefits (13 out of 33 comments), students noted, for example, that group work enabled them to share responsibilities and thus reduce the time invested and the workload, particularly in terms of the number of words they needed to produce. Xiaomei (SLW, homogenous, EAL) pointed

out that “Three people to do 3000 words and each will be only 1000.”¹ The learning/achievement related benefits (13 comments) included exposure to new ideas, the opportunities to discuss different ideas and to receive feedback on writing – particularly when EAL students worked with English L1 speakers. These benefits seem to accord with the learning benefits highlighted by other large-scale studies (e.g., Johnson & Johnson, 2009) including studies with L2 learners (e.g., Liang, 2004). Very few (2) comments were made about the personal benefits of group work, relating to greater motivation.

A number of challenges were also identified (29 comments), echoing those voiced by students in other studies (Bacon, 2005; Walker, 2002). These related mainly to the pragmatic issues of time and text cohesion, as well as interpersonal concerns. The time taken to reconcile different opinions as well as the time needed to schedule meetings was viewed by some participants (7 comments) as ‘wasted time’. Chun (SLA, homogenous, EAL), for example, explained that she initially did not like group work because it was less efficient:

sometimes if there are 4 people in a group, everyone has his own idea, and everyone has their own their own way of thinking. Maybe I will never agree with you. But I need to spend more time to clarify my ideas, to persuade people to agree my ideas. I think it's wasted time.

However, the main challenges seemed to be related to interpersonal reasons (20 comments), including different standards and expectations, different attitudes towards taking responsibility, and difficulties related to communication. There was also some expressed ambivalence about accepting and providing peer feedback. Mei (SLW, homogenous, EAL), for example, found managing interpersonal relations in group work more challenging than doing the actual work itself:

myself, is a person who like do something very ahead of time and well-organized to make a whole outline before I work on. But not everyone else do that ... the interpersonal connection ... We can't express ourselves so directly. We need to be with the harmonious atmosphere to work together. So this part is much struggle, suffer to me which is far beyond about assignment itself. So I rather to work myself without that difficulty. So I don't like groupwork.

Most EAL students we interviewed welcomed the opportunity to work with English L1 speaking peers. In LT, some EAL students indicated in their initial requests to the teacher that they would like to work with English L1 groupmates. But students also expressed some anxiety about working in multicultural groups due to concerns about language barriers and intercultural miscommunication. A great

1. All participant names reported in the article are pseudonyms.

deal of the anxiety came from a lack of confidence in their spoken English proficiency. One Indonesian student Eka (LT, mixed, EAL) expressed a strong preference not to work with English L1 peers. In fact, Eka had very good oral English fluency. She was an English teacher in Indonesia and had good interpersonal relations with other peers in the program. But she had a heightened self-awareness of her 'deficiency' in L2 competence, which constantly overshadowed and negatively affected her communication with English L1 peers:

I think I will feel more comfortable if I work with Indonesian students or Asian students. I previously worked with Australians. Maybe because of my English, I cannot speak or how to express my ideas effectively like I feel like they are not patient enough to wait for me. And I would be like "What's wrong with me? I know I am not that bad." So working with Asian students I feel like they know my pace and I know their pace and we can understand each other better.

When reflecting on their current group assignments, the majority of the students (77% or 20/26) were positive about their experience. This included eight students who admitted that the enjoyable experience of working in groups on the current assignment made them realize the value of group work. One participant who did not enjoy the group project, nevertheless saw some merits in it. Sixty-six comments were made identifying the benefits, with the main benefits being learning-related (28 comments) and mainly attributable to exposure to new ideas and approaches to writing (17 comments). For example, Catherine from LT (mixed, English L1 speaker) said:

They just saw things that I didn't...I really valued their different perspectives, the different ideas that they brought to the table. I really thought that was a better product as a result.

Furthermore, instead of viewing the need to negotiate ideas as time wasted, the students saw these discussions as valuable: they provided opportunities to learn how to negotiate and deal with different ideas (7 comments) as well as generate new ideas (3 comments). The reduced workload was also mentioned as a benefit, attributed to the ability to share responsibilities and learn to work more efficiently (8 comments).

What stood out in the post assignment reflections was the relatively large number of comments (26) highlighting the social and personal benefits of their group work experience: of making new friends and reducing social isolation (14), the emotional support that group members offered (10). As one student put it (Ying, Biling, homogenous, EAL): *"I think that's the meaning of pair work coz when you feel upset, she will support you."* Liao (SLW, homogenous, EAL) who commented that the assignment was completed during a busy end of semester

when every student feels stressed noted that “*group work make us feel that you are not alone.*” Even the student who did not enjoy her group project experience, admitted that she enjoyed the opportunity to make a new friend, and that “*after discussion we had dinner together and this was enjoyable*” (Shuxian, SLA, homogeneous, EAL).

The challenges experienced in the current assignment (37 comments) were similar to those identified earlier. The issue of time (sub-category: pragmatic) seemed to be of particular concern (15 comments) given that the students had to complete other assignments and prepare for exams. Another challenge was the difficulty of producing a cohesive text (5), given that the students often had different approaches to writing. An interesting observation related to this issue was made by Sophie (Biling, mixed, English L1 speaker):

Writing an essay together is a challenging task, it's a different sort of group work and particularly the need to change your writing style. In writing, students are encouraged to have their own voice, their own writing style, but in a group project you have to adjust a bit.

Interpersonal challenges were again the most frequently mentioned (14) and these related to problems in communication, cultural differences, and the need to deal with ‘strong personalities.’ Two students also reported feeling that they were being taken advantage of because of so called ‘free riders.’ Cultural differences in communication styles were a salient theme identified in the reflected challenges in the few mixed-background groups in our sample. For example, an LT group with mixed-background students (Olivia, Tian, and Yao) reported great challenges in their group work due to perceived cultural distance and miscommunications. Tian and Yao (both LT, mixed, EAL) noted some difficulty when communicating with their English L1 speaker groupmate Olivia, partially due to their own language-related anxiety but more importantly because of perceived cultural difference and insufficient intercultural experience. The following excerpt is Tian’s reflection on her cultural miscommunication with Olivia, particularly at the earlier stage of their group assignment. Tian kept her thoughts and opinions to herself, for fear of making mistakes and offending others, while being fully aware of the risk of appearing as an ‘irresponsible’ member in front of her English L1 speaker groupmate:

So I think communication is the biggest challenge for me. Sometimes I cannot express myself in a very clear way and they just don’t understand what I think. Sometimes I think for Chinese students, I can directly tell them that “I don’t want to do this”, or “I prefer to do this in some way”. But when I talk to them (non-Chinese groupmates), I think I cannot be so straightforward, or I have to change my way to talk to them to avoid some misunderstanding or some like unhappi-

ness. But sometimes I think it cause more troubles when I just, I mean, I didn't show my opinions or express my emotions. They just thought I, maybe I am not involved in this assignment.

Olivia (the only English L1 speaker in this mixed group), on the other hand, also reserved her opinions when communicating with the EAL groupmates in order to avoid "hurting people's feelings" and not to "step on anyone's toes". She felt frustrated at the earlier stage of the group assignment. She tried to make speculations about her groupmates' thoughts and working styles, but she also felt that she did not make enough efforts to try to understand them:

I felt with the two girls from China who I hadn't really known. I kind of had an idea. Maybe I wasn't paying attention you know. Every time they say something, I'm like I don't really know what you mean. Read into that a little bit more and think, OK, this person obviously needs someone else to make decisions for them or needs this to happen or probably works in this way.

The three students in this group all regretted not making adequate efforts to express their true opinions at an earlier stage of the group assignment. They did gradually, but only to some extent, become more open to each other's perspectives and opinions. But this came rather late and led to "a little bit tense" moments (Olivia) at the submission stage of the group assignment.

As mentioned previously, in three of the four subjects group work was optional. When we asked these students ($n=17$) why they chose to complete the assignment in groups, the main reason (12/17) was pragmatic. It was the means to reduce their individual workload, particularly given that the group assignments often required the same or only slightly higher word length as an individual assignment.

3.2.2 *Students' views regarding group formation*

In the three subjects where group formation was based on self-selection, although a few (5) students acknowledged the merits of teachers assigning students into groups to encourage students to get to know other class members from different cultures, most students (12/17) preferred to self-select their group members. In contrast, in the subject LT where the teacher assigned students to groups, most (7/9) saw the benefit of teacher allocation, particularly in terms of getting to know students from diverse backgrounds. Those that self-selected group members seemed to do so mainly on the basis of familiarity (9). They had either worked with the same student on previous group assignments or knew each other outside class, or simply because of seating proximity. Familiarity was viewed as important for effective group work and communication as noted by Chun (SLA, homogenous, EAL):

when you're familiar with someone, you can say anything you like and it's very easy to discuss with them. But if you are not familiar, you are shy to express your opinion.

Other less frequently mentioned selection criteria included a shared interest in a topic (3) and convenience (e.g., flat mates). We noted that although there was no mention of wanting to work with students from the same/different cultural/linguistic backgrounds, most of the self-selected groups consisted of students from the same L1 background (7/8). The lack of diversity in self-selected groups has been observed in a number of other studies (e.g., Chapman et al., 2006; Hinds et al., 2000; Seethmaraju & Borman, 2009; Strauss & U, 2007). As mentioned earlier, Seethamraju and Borman (2009) argue that students may be in fact better judges of who they are likely to work well with, and that these insights may contribute to better group functioning.

3.2.3 *Students' views regarding assessment*

All students received a group grade for their assignment and this seemed to accord with the preference of all 26 participants. This included a student who had to negotiate an individual grade because his partner did not contribute to the project. The student explained that had he worked with a more responsible partner, a group grade would have been acceptable. Two students noted that individual grades would be more appropriate in cases where the workload was distributed unevenly.

The two main reasons given by the students for this preference were a sense of fairness and the difficulty associated with separating individual contributions. The students felt that a group grade was appropriate when members contributed to the final outcome drawing on different skills and knowledge, and that it captures the essence of having group projects, where students pool their resources:

groupwork involve everyone's contribution. Maybe sometimes we have different academic ability like normally he will get H1 but for me it's not. But I think in groupwork it's different. It's not only about your academic skills but also your groupwork skill.
(Wanzhen, SLW, homogenous, EAL)

As this is group work it should be assessed on a shared outcome, that's the point of group work.
(Shuxian, SLA, homogenous, EAL)

Students (7) also felt that it would be difficult for a teacher to assign individual grades because of the difficulty of distinguishing individual contributions, noting also that what one person says can inspire the contribution of others. Others (3) added that individual grades would encourage competition rather than cooperation and encourage students to work only on their contribution thus negatively

affecting group relationships (what cooperative learning theorists, [e.g., Johnson & Johnson, 2009], would explain as a lack of positive interdependence). For example, Minghan (SLW, homogenous, EAL) said that:

I think it's fair – I hear some students in other subjects maybe quarrel with each other and even fight with other about who took responsibilities and contributions and I think that it's a really negative effect on our relationship

Another student (Mei, SLW, homogenous, EAL), who experienced a group assignment that included scaling based on each student identifying the section they contributed, reported that she found the approach unfair. She took on the responsibility of editing the drafts of other contributors but was penalized for not contributing a specific section and thus she received the lowest grade in the group. The experience made her feel quite negative about group work.

3.2.4 Students' views regarding pre-assignment training

All students reported that there was no training given for group work in the four subjects under investigation, with the only information given being about the word limit. However, most did not see the need for such training. Only three students mentioned the need for prior training, including the need to know some fundamental rules about successful group work and training on giving peer feedback. For example, Wanzhen (SLW, homogenous, EAL) admitted that:

because I think it's not only in university, in future career ... would be good to be taught some general rules in the groupwork, like have some instructions for...like you need to actively participate, or you need to punctual like this general rule everyone need to obey in a groupwork.

We summarize our findings on the main themes identified in the teacher and student perspectives about group assignments in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of theme-based findings

	Teachers	Students
Perceived benefits and challenges of group work		
Pragmatic	Expediency in marking; opportunity to integrate online and on-campus students	Reduce individual workload; extra time spent to coordinate and reconcile opinions
Learning or achievement	Important research training; opportunities to engage in discussion resulting in better quality projects; opportunities for peer scaffolding; preparation for the workplace	Exposure to new ideas and new approaches to writing; opportunities to receive feedback on writing (EAL)

Table 2. (continued)

Personal		Increased motivation
Social/ interpersonal	Opportunities to learn to negotiate and to contribute and value different expertise; establishing friendships	Benefits in establishing friendships and reducing social isolation, receiving peer emotional support; challenges due to different standards and expectations, different attitudes towards taking responsibility, and communication difficulties
Important decisions in implementing group assignments		
Optional vs. compulsory	Optional (but strongly encouraged) in most subjects; compulsory in one subject	Choose group work to reduce individual workload
Group size	Variation in subjects ranging from pairs (2) to small groups (2–3) to larger groups (4–5)	
Group formation	Student self-selection in most subjects; teacher assigned in one subject	Prefer self-selection based on familiarity, shared research interest and convenience; some acknowledging merits of teacher assignment
Assessment considerations		
Length/quantity of data collected	Ongoing dilemma on same length vs. longer for group assignments; reservation about fairness of criteria for marking individual vs. group assignments	
Grading	Single group grade adopted in all subjects; teacher reservation about its equity	Prefer single group grade
Pre-assignment training		
Prior training	Teacher acknowledging its importance, but no preparation sessions were given in the subjects	Reported no training except information about word limit; most did not see the need for training

4. Discussion and conclusion

It seems clear that what makes group work successful depends on many interrelated contextual factors. These include purpose(s), linguistic and cultural backgrounds of group members and their previous groupwork experiences, how the outcome is assessed, and whether training is provided. The overall response of both the teachers and students in our study to group work was very positive. They all saw merit in terms of exposure to ideas and learning to negotiate differences as well as the pragmatic benefits of group work, making the workload more manageable for students, and making the marking less time-consuming and potentially more interesting for teachers. Importantly, the notion of 'successful' group work needs to be considered carefully. Our study suggests, for example, that teachers and students may have somewhat different understandings of what constitutes 'success' in groupwork.

One important difference in the students' and teachers' attitudes to group assignments is the social benefits of group work. Students commented frequently on the social and interpersonal aspects of their past and current group work experience. They identified social reasons as equally important in group assignments – forming closer relationships, addressing isolation of international students, and coping with the demands of learning in a new environment. The teachers were more concerned with the pedagogical and curricular design and implementation of group assignments. The teachers were clearly aware of the interpersonal component of group work, as they did mention some of the challenges of interpersonal relationships in group work and the opportunities to form friendship (see Table 2). However, these opportunities were not emphasized. It might be that the social benefit was not at the forefront of the teachers' mind when discussing the rationale for group assignments or that they were not fully aware of the social significance of the students' group work experience, particularly for EAL students.

With regard to group formation, although diversity is highlighted in the literature as important (e.g., Nokes-Malaches et al., 2015), and hence the need for teacher allocation, the students tended to select students from similar linguistic backgrounds and/or those they knew well. This perhaps explains their overall positive experience and aligns with the argument (Seethamraju & Borman, 2009) that students may have greater insights about who they are likely to work effectively with. Teacher allocation worked well in LT because allocation was based on students' common interests and varying abilities (e.g., access to data) rather than linguistic background.

Some EAL students in our sample seemed to experience a paradox in their group work experience with English L1 speaking classmates. Most of the EAL students in the program are international students; and the majority of them in

the program were from Asian backgrounds. On the one hand, they expressed the interest to work with English L1 peers for group assignments. They felt the need to develop L2 linguistic competence and intercultural competence by working with students of linguistically diverse backgrounds particularly English L1 students. They recognized this skill development as an important part of their postgraduate education and professional training. But when they were given the option to self-form groups, almost all of them chose to work with peers of the same linguistic and cultural backgrounds as themselves. When they were assigned by teachers to groups with English L1 peers, they exercised extra self-monitoring and affective filter when their English L1 peers expected to hear their opinions in the group negotiation and decision making. This intentional reservation of opinion sharing was often not due to the EAL students' actual lack of L2 linguistic competence among our sampled students, but due to self-perceived inadequacy in L2 competence, lack of L2 communication confidence, and perceived cultural distance from the English L1 peers, all of which have been reported to negatively affect L2 learners' willingness to communicate in an L2 in previous literature (Denies, Yashima, & Janssen, 2015; Yashima, 2002).

Local English L1 students, on the other hand, did not express a strong preference to work with students from other linguistic or cultural backgrounds. They appreciated the exposure to new ideas from EAL students, resources brought by them (e.g., access to L2 participants), and a reduced workload. Some of them did not have rich experience working with peers from other linguistic and cultural backgrounds and may lack competence in intercultural communication. But in a mixed-background group, the English L1 students had high expectations, sometimes from the EAL students and sometimes from themselves. As members of the host community, English L1 students played a significant role in influencing the effectiveness of group assignments. Whether they have the patience to understand their EAL groupmates' opinions and working styles, and whether they are willing to take proactive strategies and actions to reconcile miscommunication or no communication can significantly alter the group experience.

Our findings on assessment of group work are also interesting. Previous literature flags some concern about group grades (e.g., Fellenz, 2016; Storch, 2017), and some teachers in our study admitted that this may be problematic. However, learners seemed unanimous in support for group grades, and this seems in line with the underlying theory of cooperation and positive interdependence (Johnson & Johnson, 1999). The inclusion of peer assessment was interpreted by the students as something that can harm group harmony and encourage competition rather than cooperation. Perhaps the relatively small size of the sampled student groups meant that 'social loafing' was less of an issue (usually the reason given for individual grades).

Finally, while literature suggests the need for training students on group assignments, the teachers in our study admitted that very little training was provided, and yet the students did not identify this as an issue. This may have been because many had experienced group work previously. That is not to say that training or at the very least open discussion about the purposes and merits of group work and how to deal with conflict would not have made the group work more effective.

Our main recommendations are that group assignments be optional in view of the fact that some students do not like group work, but that teachers make every effort to motivate group assignments among students. We think it important that the rationales for the inclusion of group work, apart from the pragmatic reasons, be explained to students so that they understand the importance of developing the social skills required for future peer collaboration in research and the workplace. We argue that the interpersonal reasons for assigning group work, such as training students on how to contribute and value different expertise and how to coordinate and negotiate, be clearly explained to students so that they understand that these are not additional things that they need to manage in the group work but are essential graduate skills. Particularly in classes with culturally/linguistically diverse students such as in many graduate programs in Australian universities, it is important for teachers to promote the message that all students' voices and contributions are respected and valued in group work. Teachers can also explore other options such as getting students to sign a group contract to prevent 'social loafing' and using logs to address challenges identified related to coordinating meetings. In a program with multiple subjects that include group assignments, training on group work could very effectively be managed at the program level, especially for commencing students with no or little prior group work experience.

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Appendix

Interview protocols for academic staff

Interview 1 (beginning of semester)

1. Tell us about the group assignment in your subject.
2. Why did you decide to have a group assignment?
3. What specific instructions do you give the students about the assignment? E.g.
 - a. Optional?
 - b. Group size/allocation and why?
4. How do you assess the assignment? (criteria, marks for individual contributions?)
5. If you have used this type of assignment previously, what do you consider to be the strengths and drawbacks of this group assignment?

Interview 2 (end of semester)

1. On reflection, how well do you think the group assignment worked?
2. Any observation on students' contributions? Composition of groups formed?
3. Any challenges you experienced when marking the assignment?
4. Would you have the same type of group assignment next time you teach this subject? And if so, would you consider making any changes to:
 - a. the task,
 - b. implementation,
 - c. assessment criteria?
5. Any other comments?

Interview protocol for students

1. In general, do you like to work on assignments in small groups? Why/why not?
2. Focusing on the group assignment in the specific subject (XXX), can you describe the group assignment you just completed:
 - a. what did it involve?
 - b. Size and composition of group?
 - c. How did you decide on who should be in your group?
3. Was it optional? If so, why did you decide to complete it as a group?
4. How was the workload divided between members of the group? Your reflections on this division?
5. Overall, how did you feel about participating in this group assignment? Enjoyable/challenging/ and why?
6. What was the most/least enjoyable aspect (if any) of participating in this group assignment?
7. How was the assignment assessed?
8. Do you think it should have been assessed differently (e.g. individual grade?)
9. Would you suggest any modifications to the way the task was implemented or assessed?
10. Any other comments?

Address for correspondence

Neomy Storch
School of Languages & Linguistics
The University of Melbourne
Melbourne, Victoria, 3001
Australia
neomys@unimelb.edu.au
 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1994-0927>

Co-author information

Helen Zhao
School of Languages & Linguistics
The University of Melbourne
helen.zhao@unimelb.edu.au

Janne Morton
School of Languages & Linguistics
The University of Melbourne
jannem@unimelb.edu.au

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