

Full Length Research Paper

Student perception on group work and group assignments in classroom teaching: The case of Bule Hora university second year biology students, South Ethiopia: An action research

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Group learning has become a common practice in schools and tertiary institutions. It provides more comfortable and supportive learning environment than solitary work. It fosters critical thinking skills, develops individual accountability, increases levels of reasoning and positive interdependence, improves problem-solving strategies and internalizes content knowledge. But many factors influence the group relation, such as members' perceptions, attitudes and willingness to cooperate and contribute as a team. Therefore, this study was conducted on students' perceptions and attitudes towards the usefulness of group work mainly, and how the students evaluate factors that may affect their participation specifically. This cross-sectional study was conducted in Bule Hora University from February to June, 2015. Quantitative research approaches had been applied; using semi-structured face-to-face interviews and focus group discussion with Biology students and Instructors. Of the total number of 47 students who participated in the study, 25 (53%) of the students' responded that they prefer group work than other types of assessment while few of them 4 (8.51%) replied that they disagree with group work use. The results indicated that students had misconception on objectives of group work and they perceived group work as a means of getting pass mark than seeing it as a means of learning cooperatively through activity.

Key words: Group work, biology, students' perception, Bule Hora, Ethiopia.

INTRODUCTION

Group learning, which is often used interchangeably with collaborative learning, cooperative learning, peer learning, community learning and constructive learning,

has become a common practice in schools and tertiary institutions (Ward and Masgoret, 2004). It is believed to provide a more comfortable and supportive learning

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environment than solitary work (Gupta, 2004; Schofield, 2006). Schofield (2006) explains that group learning fosters critical thinking skills, develops individual accountability, increases levels of reasoning and positive interdependence, improves problem-solving strategies and internalizes content knowledge. In group learning, students are divided into small groups to learn content knowledge, to explore or discuss an assigned topic, or to complete cases, projects and group assignments, to answer a few challenging questions, to exchange ideas, and share some insights with group members (Holter, 1995; Porter, 2006). Porter (2006) indicates that students who work in groups achieve better results, and are more satisfied with their learning experiences than those who do not work in collaborative groups.

It is based on constructivism that emphasizes real talk which includes discourse and exploration, talking and listening, questions, argument, speculation and sharing. Constructivism fosters active learning over passive learning, collaboration over competition, and community over isolation (Cross, 1998; Gross, 1993). The process of group work is harder than working alone as individual because individuals should cooperate with others (Campbell and Li, 2006). A group work requires students to complete work as a group with shared marks. The marks for each individual are determined by the performance of the group. Campbell and Li (2006) say that the aim of group work is to increase students' understanding of teamwork, and to enable them develop skills in coordination, collaboration, contribution, sharing, and dedication. It also benefits students in promoting retention rates, transferring knowledge, providing counseling with cognitive, physical, social, and emotional problems, and enhancing their intercommunication skills (Porter, 2006). But many factors influence the group relation, such as members' perceptions, attitudes and willingness to cooperate and contribute as a team. An important role in the outcome of group work is group member's perceptions and attitudes towards group work. Most students may enjoy group work where they could discuss their academic issues but may dislike it where all members share the same marks regardless of the contribution made by the members. To many participants, this type of practice puts bright and hardworking students at unfair disadvantage and rewards dull and lazy ones, and promotes laziness and irresponsibility at the sacrifice of the efforts of hardworking students (Campbell and Li, 2006).

CSHE (2002) and Burdett (2003) add that, lack of clear objectives, inequality of contribution among group members, unequal distribution of effort, unequal effort not reflected in marks, difficulties of accommodating different work schedules for meeting times, overuse of group work, lack of staff support, the potent effects of assessment, lack of choice and flexibility, difficulty in accommodating cultural and language differences by

students and collaboration are some of the factors that affect using group in classroom teaching. The assumptions behind group work and group assignments are to make learning meaningful through active learning since learners gather information from different sources, and see the relationship among ideas and finally organize and formulate their own ideas. However, the rationale of group work is achieved when group members fully participate in work. In contrary to this, from classroom teaching-learning experiences, researchers believed that their students' participation in group work was usually inadequate. Therefore, this study was conducted on students' perceptions and attitudes towards the usefulness of group work mainly, and how the students evaluate factors that may affect their participation specifically.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Description of the study area

This study was conducted in Bule Hora University Borena Zone South Ethiopia. Borana zone is one of 13 administrative zones of Oromia state in Ethiopia. It is located in the Southern part of the state (between 3°36' to 6°38' North latitude and 3°43' to 39°30' East longitude) and near border of Kenya. Bule Hora University is found in Bule Hora town 100 km away from Yabello in northern direction 467 km south of Addis Ababa (Lasage et al., 2010).

Study design

Cross-sectional study was used to assess factors affecting the use of group and group activities in class room teaching from February to June, 2015.

Tools of data collection

A qualitative research approach had been applied; using semi-structured face-to-face interviews lasting up to one hour and focus group discussion with instructors from Biology department to triangulate the data obtained from students.

Method of data analysis

Data collected using questionnaires had been analyzed using SPSS version 16.00 and presented in tables, statements and interpreted quantitatively and qualitatively. Data that had been taken from instructors through interview and by making face discussion were interpreted qualitatively and presented in a summarized form.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of data from students

All forty seven (47) students (100%) replied that group

Table 1. Teachers' implementation of group work in class room teaching.

Question	Alternative	Respondent	Percentage
Did your instructors give you group work or group assignment?	Yes	47	100
	No	0	0
If your answer to number 1 is yes, how many of your instructors use small group in classroom teaching and for outside class works?	Almost all	33	70.21
	Some	12	25.53
	Very few	2	4.26
How frequent do your instructors give you group work or group assignment?	Always	19	40.43
	Sometimes	26	55.32
	Rarely	2	4.26

work is given to them by their instructors of which 70.21% of them said group work is applied by nearly all instructors in class room teaching. However, a few students (25.53%) and very few (4.26%) of them replied as group work is used by some and very few instructors respectively (Table 1). As indicated in Table 1, 40.4% of the students said that their teachers always use group work, and 55.32% of them responded their teachers sometimes use it. Few students (4.26%) said their teachers rarely apply group work. The data in Table 2 indicate that group work is implemented nearly by all instructors but, they did not use it all the time. So, it is possible to say the frequency of group work implementation is fair in average. The students' perception towards learning can be expressed in a range of behaviors, and their values are the basis for their perceptions. Students whose learning perception is positive will try to become more responsible in their learning, and those whose perception is negative will not (Brown, 1994; Wenden, 1991; Wright, 1987). To this end, of the total students who were asked to fill questionnaires 25 (53%) of the students' responded that they prefer group work than other types of assessment which indicates that they strongly agree with group work as means of learning and assessment while few of them 4 (8.51%) replied that they disagree with group work use in class room teaching (Table 2).

Of the total respondents 31 (65.96%) of them reported they strongly agree that group work motivates them to learn from work and 16(34.04%) of them replied they agree that group work motivates them to learn from work. In addition, of the total respondents 31 (65.96%) strongly agree and 15 (31.92%) of them agree that group work develops their independent learning. Of the total respondents 32 (68.09 %) of them said that they strongly agree as group work help them to develop thinking ability and self-esteem respectively. Of the total respondents 29 (61.70%) and 17 (36.17%) of the respondents said group work give them the chance to share ideas with others and they learn better from group interaction than lecture

respectively while 17(36.17%), 15 (31.92%), 7(36.17%), 4(8.51%) replied that they strongly agree, agree, have no opinion, disagree and strongly disagree with idea that they learn better from group interaction than lecture respectively. Highest numbers of the respondents strongly agree that they learn better from group interaction than lecture. This shows that students feel positive about functions of group work. Similarly, Campbell and Li (2006) reported that that Asian students viewed group work positively as place where they can discuss the course related topics and issues, interact and make friends with other students from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds, and develop their problem-solving and interpersonal communication skills, and other skills such as conflict management and resolution, team building, collaboration and sustainability.

Regarding disadvantages of group work, 12 (25.53%), 11 (23.40%), 12(25.53%), 5 (10.64%) and 7 (14.89%) respondents replied that they strongly agree, agree, have no opinion, disagree and strongly disagree with fairness of a group grade, in which highest number 12 (25.53%) replied that group grade is not fair. Respondents give value on perception towards group difficulties such, making them busy, adding burden work on them, difficulties to get together outside their classes, to get references and to share work among members equally. Accordingly, of the total respondents 15 (31.92%) agree that group work make them busy, 17(14.89%) of them responded that they agree as group adds burden work on them. Of the total respondents that had the highest, 13 (27.66%) of them replied as they have no opinion as it is difficult to get together outside class while 16 (34.04%) of them agree with idea that it is difficult to get relevant references for group work. Highest number of respondents (13 (27.66%)) replied strongly agree and agree with the idea of its difficulty to share work equally to members in group work. The student's response show that a number of them feel group grade is not fair, group work adds burden work on them, it makes them busy, and it is difficult to meet outside classes while

Table 2. Students' perceptions on group assignment.

Question	Response										Total	
	SA		A		NO		DA		SDA		F	%
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%		
I prefer group work than other types of assessment	25	53.19	17	36.17	1	2.13	4	8.51	0	00.00	47	100
It motivates me to learn from work	31	65.96	16	34.04	0	0	0	0	0	0	47	100
It develops my independent learning habit	31	65.96	15	31.92	0	0	0	0	1	2	47	100
It helps me develop thinking ability and self-esteem	32	68.09	11	23.40	1	2.13	1	2.13	2	4.26	47	100
It gives me chance to share ideas with others	29	61.70	15	31.92	0	0	1	2.13	2	4.26	47	100
I learn better from group interaction than lecture	17	36.17	15	31.92	7	14.89	4	8.51	4	8.51	47	100
A group grade is not fair	12	25.53	11	23.40	12	25.53	5	10.64	7	15	47	100
Group assignment makes me unnecessary busy	9	19.15	15	31.92	9	19.15	5	10.64	9	19.15	47	100
It adds burden work on me	9	19.15	17	36.17	6	12.77	7	14.89	9	19.15	47	100
It is difficult to get together outside class	9	19.15	8	17.02	13	27.66	8	17.02	9	19.15	47	100
It is difficult to get relevant references	13	27.66	16	34.04	6	12.77	5	10.64	7	14.89	47	100
It is difficult to share members work equally	13	27.66	13	28	9	19.15	7	14.89	5	10.64	47	100

F = Frequency; SA = Strongly Agree; A = Agree; NO = No Opinion; D = Disagree; SDA = Strongly Disagree.

Table 3. Students role in doing group assignment.

Question	Response										Total	
	SA		A		NO		DA		SDA		F	%
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%		
Group members do not respect my opinion	10	21.27	7	14.89	10	21.27	11	23.40	9	19.15	47	100
Some members do not participate	11	23.40	14	29.79	6	12.77	7	1.89	9	19.15	47	100

SA = Strongly Agree; A = Agree; NO = No Opinion; D = Disagree and SDA = Strongly Disagree.

other respondents indicate difficulties of group work in searching for materials and sharing tasks equally. Therefore, these believes of respondents could force them to feel negative about functions of group work.

Tables 3 states students' participation in group work, that is, students respects each other and fairly participation in team work. Of the total respondents, 11 (23.40%) of them strongly disagree with the idea that group members do not

respect each members idea while few 7 (14.89%) of them agree with the idea. Highest number 14 (29.79%) of the respondents agree with the idea that some of their members do not participate in group work and group discussion. Table 4 shows

Table 4. Factors hindering group work.

Statement	Responses										Total	
	5		4		3		2		1		F	%
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%		
Group members do not respect everyone's opinion	13	27.66	8	17.02	4	8.51	7	14.89	15	31.91	47	100
Some members do not participate	16	34.04	6	12.76	9	19.15	11	23.40	5	10.63	47	100
members share roles such as leader, secretary, presenter	4	8.51	1	2.13	8	17.02	20	42.55	14	29.79	47	100
Members share activities that is, collection, evaluation, or organization of evidences from resources	3	6.38	11	23.40	13	27.66	20	42.55	0	0	47	100
Group assignment is done by one student	16	34.04	4	8.51	11	23.40	4	8.51	12	25.53	47	100
Some group members forget to do their share work	18	38.29	9	19.15	10	21.28	2	4.26	8	17.02	47	100
Some members get good grade without doing work	17	36.17	7	14.89	6	12.77	6	12.77	11	23.40	47	100
members do not share works equally	15	31.91	9	19.15	12	25.53	2	4.26	9	19.15	47	100

5 = Always; 4 = Usually; 3 = Sometimes; 2 = Rarely; 1 = Never.

factors hindering group work implementation and how often these factors affect students' participations in group work. Highest number 13(27.66%) of respondents said that group members do not always respect everyone's opinion while few number 4(8.51%) of them replied as group members do not rarely respect every ones opinion. This shows that respondents feel some group members do not respect their opinion and some members do not participate. Similarly, the students response show 16 (34.04%) some members do not participate in group work which confirms the above factors. In

other way, highest number 20 (42.55%) of respondents replied that members rarely share roles such as leader, secretary, presenter and share activities that is, collection, evaluation, or organization of evidences from resources in group work. Lowest number 3(6.38%) and 1(2.13%) of the respondents said that members always share activities that is, collection, evaluation, or organization of evidences from resources and sometimes share roles such as leader, secretary, presenter, respectively. Table 4 also shows that, of the total respondents 16 (34.04%) of them said that group assignment is always done by one

student. In other ways 18 (38.29%) of the respondents replied that some group members always forget to do their share work and 17 (36.17%) of them said as some members always get good grade without doing work. This is evidence for that 15 (31.91%) of members do not always share works equally. Thus, the data indicates as group assignment is done by one student, some members do not share works equally and still they get good grade without doing work. Similarly, Liu et al. (2010) reported as more respondents replied poor motivation, lack of individual accountability and negative

interdependence affect the implementation of group work.

Analysis of data from instructors

The interview and focus group discussion was conducted with instructors to obtain in depth information. All interviewed instructors replied that they usually implement group work in class room teaching. Similarly, all interviewees said that the students' perception about benefits of group assignment is positive since their learners prefer group assignment than individual assignment and classroom tests. However, of the instructors participated in discussion majority of them explained that their students have misconception on objectives of group work, and they reasoned out this by saying students perceive group work as a means of getting pass mark than seeing it as a means of learning cooperatively through activity. They also added students usually ask for mark without achieving task objectives. All instructors felt the extent of member's participations is usually low in general and it differs among members although, group members usually obtain the same mark. According to them this may be due to poor back ground knowledge and lack of skills in time and team work, lack of interest to accept responsibility for their learning, other personality traits such low self-esteem, low confidence, fear, motivation to mark than to work, need of dependence on dominant learners and lack of ability as main hindrance factors. Instructor's response also showed students prefer group assignment and group work than other types of assessment. The extent of every member's participations in group work was agreed up onto be low and learners' participations was seen as a varied type. The discussion also show as factors such as, learners' poor back ground knowledge of content, lack of experiences and skills in time and team work management, in searching, evaluating, and organizing evidences from various sources were reflected in group work and indicated as these factors were seen as causes for learners' lack of interest to accept responsibility in group work. Therefore, they could develop low self-esteem, low confidence, feel of fear, and sense of depending on dominant learners.

Conclusion

From data and information earlier mentioned, it is possible to conclude that group work is implemented by nearly all instructors in a fair level of frequency. Students' perception towards benefits of group assignment is also positive since learners preferred group assignment than individual assignment and classroom tests. However, students has misconception on objectives of group work, and they perceived group work as a means of getting

pass mark than seeing it as a means of learning cooperatively through activity. Therefore, students were blamed for asking mark without achieving task objectives. The students' perception towards difficulties of group work such as unfairness of group grade, making them busy, adding burden work on them, and difficulties to get together outside their classes could affect the participation. Learners' poor back ground knowledge of content, lack of experiences and skills in time and team work management, in searching, evaluating, and organizing evidences from various sources were factors which reflected as causes for learners' lack of interest to accept responsibility of learning. Therefore, they could develop low self-esteem, low confidence, feel of fear, and sense of depending on dominant learners.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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