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PERCEPTIONS OF EFL STUDENTS IN DIFFERENT PROFICIENCY LEVELS TOWARD GROUP WORK EXPERIENCES DURING ONLINE LEARNING

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Abstract
Cooperative learning has frequently been studied experimentally, with evidence of its numerous benefits. However, the extent to which students understand their role in enhancing the method's positives is still being determined, and how learners perceive their interactions should be noticed. This study examined students of English as a Foreign Language perceived group interaction at a different proficiency level (proficient and less proficient) during online learning. The study employed a quantitative research design using a survey technique with statistical data analysis. Data showed insignificant differences in perceptions between the proficient and the less proficient students with ($p>0.05$). Thus, proficient, and less proficient students could provide learning opportunities when they worked collaboratively. Moreover, all students preferred to work collaboratively regardless of their proficiency level. These findings suggest that proficiency differences were not the decisive factor affecting the nature of students' interaction in groups. Instead, the pattern of interaction co-constructed by learners may have a more significant impact on students learning performance.

Keywords— Cooperative learning, Group work, perceptions, proficient, less proficient

Introduction

Online group work is a prevalent teaching method that is gaining traction (Kim et al., 2005). Task types, technology, group size, and individual accountability influence online group work (Hathorn & Ingram, 2002). Online group work has various significant issues, including students' aversion to group work, a lack of group work skills, and the free rider and sucker effect (Roberts & McInnerney, 2007). Individuals participating in online group work are frequently required to put their interests aside for the sake of the group.

What complicates online group work is that some students reported feeling hesitant to accept advice and disapproval from group members, trying to prevent additional exchanges and helpful feedback (Thompson & Ku, 2010). Furthermore, online group work is time-consuming and resource-intensive (Macneill et al., 2014). Thus, it may not be appropriate for short interactions. Because of time and location constraints, group members should provide delayed or no feedback.

Online group work, on the other hand, can certainly assist students; they can learn and perform appropriately. Online group work could provide students with a significantly more prosperous and profound experience, as well as the opportunity to enhance more excellent thinking abilities and discover how to deal with complex and abstract challenges (Macneill et al., 2014). To pique students' intrigue in group work, teachers should emphasize the benefits of group work, including the varied learning skills students can acquire (Roberts & McInnerney,

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2007). Group members can develop collaboration skills such as communication, leadership, and shared vision (Jackson et al., 2014).

Although student proficiency has been discussed as one of the influencing factors (i.e., members' interaction), more research needs to be conducted to demonstrate how learners with varying proficiency levels interact and perceive their engagement in online group work activities. Exploring the students' perceptions could reveal rich insight into their group work experiences in online learning, particularly the perceptions of students with different proficiency levels. This study examines whether there is any statistically significant difference in the perceptions of group work experiences of proficient and less-proficient students. Specifically, the study addressed the following research hypothesis:

H0: There is no statistically significant difference in proficient and less proficient students' perceptions toward the online group work experience

H1: There is any statistically significant difference in proficient and less proficient students' perceptions toward the online group work experience

Literature Review

Several scholars have recently studied how the interaction of different ability students in group learning has increased. Gender differences and skill levels can impact group performance (Tanner & Lindquist, 1998). Both low and high-ability students benefited from group learning (Rasyid, 2017). Furthermore, scholar defines ability as students' demonstrated performance and level of competence that the instructor can evaluate (Tieso, 2005). A heterogeneous ability group is formed when instructors assign low and high-ability students (mix-ability). On the other hand, a homogeneous ability group is formed by setting the same ability togather in one groups.

As a result, the mix-ability group benefits both low and high-ability students. Low-ability students benefit from mixed-ability groups because they can socialize with and learn from students with average and high abilities. As a result, they are less likely to feel stigmatized, and their study motivation increases (Poole, 2008). Furthermore, placing low-ability students in mixed-ability groups allows them to achieve excellent academic results. This improvement can be seen in various indicators, including increased curriculum knowledge, better study habits, learning strategies, increased confidence, and increased motivation to learn (Heltemes, 2009).

In addition, low-ability learners can benefit from high-ability students in various ways (Lou et al., 2001). Because high-ability comprehend the material better, they commonly develop and teach it to low-ability students. As a result, even a simple explanation of the discussion of the issue is advantageous for low-ability students (Lou et al., 2001). Furthermore, the mix-ability group provides the possibility of higher academic achievement for students with high ability. According to studies, in mixed-ability groups, high-ability students are more regularly expected to provide leadership and explanations of material through peer explanation or individual skills obtained through interactiveness (Lou et al., 2001; Ballantine & Larres, 2007).

Furthermore, low-ability students benefited the most in a mixed-ability group, particularly in the leadership domain (Ballantine and Larres, 2007). The interaction is necessary to develop skills that prepare them for work-related and lifelong learning. According to the students who participated in the study, low and high-ability students are even more motivated to study in heterogeneous groups. Furthermore, low-ability students are motivated by the belief that the presence of higher-ability peers equips them with more possibilities to enhance their performance (Heath, 2000). In mixed-ability groups, high-ability students expanded their motivation equally, but for different reasons (Lou et al., 2001). Helping others motivates most high-ability students just as much as discussing a subject with classmates of similar abilities.

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Furthermore, research also describe numerous disadvantages of this grouping technique (Poole, 2008). The major drawback of mixed-ability groups for low-ability students is that they have fewer opportunities to engage in groups ruled by high-ability students. Students believe that one explanation impede the group improvements (Lou et al., 2001; Poole, 2008). Scholars argues that students with better public speaking tend to lead the team, so other group members are not given similar contributions (Hoang & Nooy, 2020).

Group work has several advantages in the language classroom (Ababneh, 2017). First, it helps to generates the use of language interactions because teachers are no longer the dominant figure in the classroom. It helps in overcoming the problem of large classes by allowing more students to speak. Second, group work creates a welcoming environment for students because they do not have to address the entire class but only their small colleagues. Finally, group work encourages students to be more responsible and autonomous because the learner cannot rely on other students to complete the task.

Furthermore, a substantial body of research suggests that group work in college, particularly in English language classrooms, could provide students with more opportunities to use the language in meaningful and real-life situations, thereby enhancing their language competence (Harianingsih & Jusoh, 2022). In the last decade, numerous studies have investigated the profound effects of group work on second language acquisition (Harianingsih et al., 2021; Harianingsih & Jusoh, 2022). According to the study's findings, group work encourages and improves the performance of all students (Luo, 2018). In addition, group work reduced students' anxiety while improving their language proficiency. group work is feasible in both small and large classes. Because group learning improved student achievement and language proficiency, several studies on student achievement and language competency drew much attention in the literature. For example, study in Iran using a pre-test, post-test, and standardized proficiency test to investigate the effects of cooperative learning on reading competency. The findings revealed that participants' reading abilities improved significantly (Marzban & Alinejad, 2014).

The adverse effects of diverse ability groups on high-ability students were not discipline-specific. Studies have shown that when high-ability students interact with lower-ability students, they progress more slowly and do not reach their full potential (Roger, 1997). If high-ability students believe that working with lower-ability students will limit their progress, they may lose even more motivation to study in this group setting (Lou et al., 2001; Poole, 2008).

Research Method and Material

This study involved 278 EFL students from different programs, thus they were joining Foreign Language for Specific Purposes (FLSP), a compulsory subject at University Muhammadiyah Malang 2021/2022. This study employed quantitative research design as (Creswell, 2017) refer to quantitative research as the "numerical representation of observations to describe and explain the phenomena that those observations reflect". Thus, data were gathered using online survey using google form distributed to the population of first-year undergraduate students in FLSP subject. To collect the data this study used Online Cooperative Learning Attitude Scale (OCLAS) to fits the need of the online group work situation. Then, the data were analyzed using independent sample t-test aimed to identify the different perceptions of proficient and less proficient students.

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Table 1. Demographics Profile

FLSP Score	Score	Frequency	Proficiency levels
FLSP Score	A	175	Proficient
	B+	52	Less proficient
	B	42	Less proficient
	C	9	Less proficient

Table above illustrates the demographics profile of students seen from their FLSP scores. From the data shows that the majority of the participants received A score with the percentage of 63%, and the remaining participants received B+, B, and C. In this study, Watanabe, (2008) guides the determination the classification of proficiency levels, Watanabe classifies students based on a 50-point difference in each class, therefore for A scores were determined as Proficient and remaining B+,B, and C were determined as Less Proficient.

Table 2. Attitude and Perception toward CL in online settings

Findings and Discussion

To answer the research objective and test the hypothesis the study was intended to analyze the data using the independent sample t-test. Furthermore, a table analysis of an independent sample t-test to examine the students' perceptions based on students' proficiency is shown in the table below.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Students English Proficiency

Group Statistics

	Proficiency	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Perceptions	Proficient	175	57.59	11.721	0.886
	Less Proficient	103	56.82	13.180	1.299

Table 2 is a descriptive statistical table of students' perceptions of online group work based on students' proficiency. In the table above, proficient students received a higher mean score (M=57.59, SD=11.721), while less proficient students received a mean score (M=56.82, SD=13.180). However, this study's objective was to examine whether the differences were significant between proficient and less proficient groups. Therefore, the independent sample t-test needs to be done. Conducting the parametric test, the normality of the data has been sure. Table 3 below illustrates the result of the test of independent sample T-test.

Table 3. Independent Samples T-Test

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
							95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper

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1.683	0.196	0.507	276	0.613	0.773	1.525	-2.229	3.775

Table 3 shows the result of the test of Levene's Test for Equality of Variances. The results of the t-test for Equality of Means showed there was no statistically significant difference in perceptions for proficient and less-proficient groups, t (276) = .507, p=.613, therefore, the null hypothesis is accepted.

These results are consistent with the findings of previous studies suggesting that insignificant different was found between students in different proficiency levels. To begin with, (Mahmoud, 2011) investigated the interaction of categorizing students as high achievers or low achievers. The terms were used to differentiate students' Proficiency levels. The findings revealed no significant difference in group interaction between students from high and low achievers, both high and low achievers in the group made the same progress. In the same way, both higher- and lower-level proficiency perceive their group learning experience similarly (Watanabe, 2008). Both offered possibilities to comprehend materials more when they collaborated.

In the different nuances of a picture from accounting students, (Ballantine & Larres,2007) investigated final-year undergraduates' perceptions of group dynamics and group work skills. Authors classified students as less and more capable based on their grades in an accounting module. The study discovered no significant difference between 'less able' and more able' students' perspectives on group dynamics or skills developed. However, the opposite findings showed when viewed from a different angle. The significant differences in perceptions of their contribution to the learning of their group members were discovered between high achievers and low achievers (Ghaith, 2001). Naturally, the high achievers reported having contributed more to the learning of others than the low achievers. Nonetheless, in comparison to the low achievers, this perception of the amount of their contribution had no statistically significant effect on how high achievers perceived group work and the usefulness and affective aspects of this strategy. Meanwhile, all the low achievers appreciated their group work experience and felt they had learned much.

Other study found that while low-ability learners performed better in group work, high-ability learners also performed well (Saleh et al., 2007). Furthermore, prior scholars argue that participating in group projects significantly improved low-ability learners' competence when interacting with other (Song et al., 2004). There are several methods for low-ability students to learn from high-ability students in groups (Lou et al., 2001). Because high-ability students understand the material better, they frequently develop and teach it to low-ability students. As a result, even a simple explanation of the topic of the challenge is beneficial for low-ability students (Lou et al., 2001).

High-ability students, on the other hand, increased their motivation in groups for similar reasons (Lou et al., 2001). Helping others motivates most high-ability students just as much as discussing a subject with classmates of similar abilities. Furthermore, the mix-ability group can improve academic achievement for students with high abilities. According to research, in mixed-ability groups, high-ability students are more frequently expected to provide leadership and explanations of material through peer elaboration or personal knowledge acquired through group interaction (Lou et al., 2001; Ballantine & Larres, 2007).

Conclusion

The findings of this study have revealed that the different proficiency level students' perceptions of their engagement in group work activities taking place in online learning. Based on the result of the test, it was clearly demonstrated that no significant different were found

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between proficient and less proficient groups in regards of their perceptions. Prior researchers have proved that the students' interactions in group work activities were beneficial for students in different proficiency levels. Even though the participant in this study were unsure about their perceptions toward the group work experiences, however they were reported not negative about their perceptions. in conclusion, proficient and less proficient students perceive their group work experiences during online learning the same way. In addition, there were several recommendations for future scholars. First, a similar study needs to be conducted on second or third-year students who are familiar with online group work. Additionally, the sample size needs to be expanded to include students with a more diverse range of language proficiency. Finally, to have a qualitative method to get a rich understanding of how students perceive their engagement in online group work seen from different proficiency levels.

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