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Factors Influencing EFL Learners' Participation in Group Work in Speaking Classes at Elmergib University

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العوامل المؤثرة في مشاركة متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في العمل الجماعي ضمن فصول المحادثة في جامعة المرقب

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Abstract:

Group work is widely recognized in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction as a vital interactive approach for promoting oral fluency, peer communication, and learner-centered practice. However, learners' willingness to participate actively in collaborative speaking activities is influenced by complex and multifaceted factors. This study addresses the second research question: What are the factors that influence EFL students' attitudes towards participating in group work activities? A focused qualitative analysis was conducted using data collected through semi-structured interviews with nine EFL undergraduate students from diverse faculties at Elmergib University. The findings indicate that participation is shaped by an intricate interplay of individual learner characteristics, peer group dynamics, linguistic choices, task design, affective filters, and classroom conditions. Specifically, individual confidence, prior task preparation, and personality significantly affect engagement. Internal group dynamics, particularly peer encouragement versus peer dominance, directly influence comfort levels. Frequent switching to the first language (Arabic) functions as an avoidance mechanism, limiting spoken English practice. Additionally, participants expressed a clear preference for authentic, task-based designs such as role-plays and debates, while noting that speaking anxiety, classroom noise, and the absence of structured roles impede equitable participation. These findings are discussed in relation to Sociocultural Theory, Cooperative Learning Theory, and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT). The study concludes that successful group speaking tasks require intentional pedagogical structuring, explicit role division, and guided teacher facilitation to promote sustained communicative engagement.

Keywords: group work, speaking skills, participation factors, student attitudes, peer dynamics, EFL learners, Elmergib University, Libya.

الملخص:

يُعد العمل الجماعي (Group Work) أسلوباً تعليمياً تفاعلياً وضرورياً في تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية (EFL)، لدوره البارز في تعزيز الطلاقة الشفهية، والتواصل بين الأقران، وتطبيق الممارسات المتمحورة حول المتعلم. ومع ذلك،

فإن رغبة المتعلمين في المشاركة الفعالة في أنشطة التحدث الجماعية تحكمها ظروف وشروط معقدة ومتعددة الأوجه. تتناول هذه الورقة البحثية السؤال البحثي الثاني في الأطروحة: ما العوامل التي تؤثر على مواقف طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية تجاه المشاركة في أنشطة العمل الجماعي؟ وتقدم الورقة تحليلاً نوعياً مركزاً للبيانات المستمدة من مقابلات شبه منظمة أجريت مع تسعة طلاب من مختلف كليات جامعة المرقب. أظهرت النتائج أن مشاركة الطلاب تتشكل من خلال تفاعل متشابك بين الخصائص الفردية للمتعلم، وديناميكيات مجموعة الأقران، والخيارات اللغوية، وتصميم المهام، والعوامل الوجدانية، وظروف البيئة الصفية. وبشكل خاص، تؤثر الثقة الفردية، والاستعداد المسبق للمهام، والسمات الشخصية بشكل حاسم على مستوى التفاعل. كما أن طبيعة العلاقات داخل المجموعة—لا سيما تشجيع الأقران في مقابل هيمنة بعض الطلاب—تتحكم مباشرة في مستويات الارتياح والأمان النفسي. وتبين أن اللجوء المتكرر للغة الأولى (العربية) يمثل استراتيجية تعويضية تعيق ممارسة التحدث باللغة الإنجليزية الهدف. وعلاوة على ذلك، أبدى المشاركون تفضيلاً جلياً للمهام التواصلية الأصلية القائمة على المهام (مثل لعب الأدوار والمناظرات)، في حين أشاروا إلى أن قلق التحدث، والوضوء الصفية، وغياب توزيع الأدوار المنظم يحد من المشاركة المتكافئة. وتربط المناقشة هذه النتائج بالنظرية الاجتماعية الثقافية، ونظرية التعلم التعاوني، والتدريس القائم على المهام. وتخلص الورقة إلى أن نجاح مهام التحدث التعاونية يتطلب تخطيطاً تدريسياً مقصوداً، وتوزيعاً صريحاً للأدوار، وتوجيهاً مستمراً من قبل المعلم لضمان مشاركة تواصلية عادلة ومستدامة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: العمل الجماعي؛ مهارات التحدث؛ عوامل المشاركة؛ مواقف الطلاب؛ ديناميكيات الأقران؛ متعلمو الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية؛ جامعة المرقب؛ ليبيا.

Introduction:

Oral proficiency is widely recognized as a key indicator of linguistic competence in foreign language education, as it reflects learners' ability to negotiate meaning and articulate ideas accurately and fluently in real time. In tertiary English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, promoting spoken interaction remains challenging because students often have limited exposure to authentic communicative discourse beyond formal academic settings. In Libyan higher education, English instruction has traditionally relied on teacher-centered approaches focused on explicit grammatical analysis and passive learning, which provide students with few opportunities to develop spoken communicative confidence.

To address these structural limitations, group work has been increasingly implemented as a collaborative pedagogical approach that redistributes communicative responsibility among peers, fosters oral experimentation, and creates a supportive social environment for language production. Theoretical frameworks such as Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory suggest that cognitive and linguistic development occurs primarily through social mediation and peer scaffolding within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Additionally, Cooperative Learning Theory emphasizes that effective collaboration depends on positive interdependence, individual accountability, and constructive peer interaction.

Although collaborative techniques present theoretical advantages, their effectiveness in classroom settings is contingent upon practical factors that influence learners' willingness to participate. The realities of classroom dynamics introduce complex social, psychological, and institutional variables that shape student attitudes toward group oral activities.

The original master's dissertation investigated students' attitudes towards group work in developing speaking skills at Elmergib University. While the overarching project employed a mixed-methods design, the second research question focused specifically on the factors influencing students' attitudes towards participating in group work activities. This paper extracts and analyzes those qualitative findings, focusing on the conditions, challenges, and instructional dynamics that shape participation patterns during collaborative speaking tasks.

Purpose and Research Question:

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the factors influencing the attitudes of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) undergraduate students toward group work activities in speaking classes.

Research Question:

- What are the factors that influence EFL students' attitudes towards participating in group work activities?

Accordingly, this analysis examines the reported conditions of participation, peer interactions, socio-affective variables, and instructional structures that influence students' engagement in collaborative speaking classes.

Theoretical Framework: Factors Influencing Participation in Group Work:

Individual Differences and Socio-Educational Factors:

Individual factors, including motivation, communicative self-confidence, and language anxiety, significantly influence learner engagement in oral tasks [6, 10]. According to Gardner's socio-educational model, positive attitudes toward the learning context increase learners' willingness to

communicate [6]. In contrast, elevated foreign language anxiety and low self-perceived proficiency often result in inhibition and communicative withdrawal, especially during small-group oral interactions [6, 7, 11].

Peer Dynamics and Principles of Cooperative Learning:

Cooperative Learning Theory posits that effective collaboration depends on structural positive interdependence, in which students perceive their achievements as mutually linked, and on individual accountability, which ensures that each member contributes meaningfully [8, 14]. In the absence of explicit role division, group work frequently devolves into dominance by more vocal members or social loafing and passivity among less confident peers [7, 8]. Supportive peer interactions reduce anxiety, while unsupportive dynamics decrease learners' willingness to participate [10, 14].

Task-Based Instruction and the Construction of Communicative Meaning:

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) posits that meaningful oral interaction arises when learners participate in goal-oriented tasks that prioritize communicative intent [1, 4]. The design and organization of classroom activities are critical factors influencing student participation [4, 10]. Authentic and interactive tasks, including problem-solving scenarios, structured debates, and role-plays, foster active communicative engagement [1, 4]. Conversely, unstructured or decontextualized tasks may result in confusion, off-task discourse, and reduced engagement [7, 14].

Methodology:

This study is based on the qualitative component of an MA dissertation conducted at the School of Languages, The Libyan Academy [5, 92]. The original research examined EFL speaking classes across five faculties at Elmergib University, including the Faculty of Arts and Sciences in Al-Khums, Msallata, and Qasr Akhyar, and the Faculty of Education in Al-Khums and Msallata, during the 2025–2026 academic year [5].

To address the research question concerning factors influencing participation, qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with nine EFL students [5]. Purposive sampling ensured the inclusion of students with diverse levels of communicative confidence, group roles, and collaborative experiences [5]. All interviews were conducted face-to-face, recorded with informed consent, and transcribed verbatim [5].

The qualitative data were analyzed thematically using Braun and Clarke's procedures [15]. Transcripts were coded iteratively to identify recurring patterns related to students' lived experiences and the situational factors influencing their engagement [5, 15]. Qualitative extracts were assigned participant codes from S1 to S9 to ensure anonymity [5]. The findings pertain specifically to the higher-education context at Elmergib University [5].

Findings and Discussion:

Personal Confidence, Language Proficiency, and Preparedness:

A primary internal factor influencing group participation is the learner's self-perceived proficiency and psychological confidence [5, 6, 10]. The interview data revealed that confident, proficient students naturally stepped into leadership and organizational responsibilities [5, 6]. For instance, S1 stated: "I usually lead the discussion and make sure everyone stays focused" [5]. Conversely, less proficient or linguistically hesitant students reported feeling intimidated when interacting with more fluent peers [5, 10]. As S8 explained: "I become nervous when others speak better English than I" [5].

Group Dynamics: Peer Support and Domination:

Interpersonal interactions within small groups significantly influence student attitudes [5, 10, 14]. Participants indicated that a collaborative and supportive peer environment increased their comfort and willingness to speak [5, 14]. S1 stated, "My classmates encourage me, so I feel more comfortable" [5], and S4 observed, "speaking in groups is less stressful than speaking in front of the teacher" [5].

In contrast, unsupportive or imbalanced group dynamics had negative consequences [5, 7, 8]. Unequal participation, characterized by the dominance of outspoken individuals and the marginalization of quieter peers, emerged as a recurring challenge [5, 7, 8]. S2 observed, "some students talk a lot, and others do not speak" [5]. In these contexts, participation was perceived as uneven rather than collaborative [5, 8]. S7 emphasized that confidence was closely linked to egalitarian interaction: "If some members dominate the talk, I feel less confident. But when everyone shares equally, I feel more comfortable" [5]. These accounts demonstrate that peer interaction can either reduce speaking anxiety or increase self-consciousness, depending on the equitable distribution of conversational turns [5, 7, 10].

Individual task preparation also emerged as a critical factor for effective group involvement [5, 11]. When group members lacked adequate prior preparation, collaborative progress was hindered [5, 11]. S6 highlighted this issue: "Some students come without preparing, and this affects the group" [5]. These findings indicate that participation is shaped by individual self-efficacy and readiness, and that disparities in linguistic confidence may suppress active participation if not addressed [5, 6, 9].

Language Choice and First-Language (L1) Reliance:

A significant linguistic factor affecting group participation was the tension between practicing English and reverting to the first language [1, 4, 5]. Interview data indicated that students frequently switched from English to Arabic during group discussions [5]. This code-switching generally occurred when learners lacked the necessary vocabulary, encountered complex concepts, or had concerns about grammatical accuracy [5, 11].

Although code-switching into Arabic offered emotional support and aided task comprehension, it reduced opportunities for oral practice in the target language [1, 4, 5]. According to S5 and S7, excessive dependence on Arabic compromised the main communicative objective of the task [5]. Interview findings indicate that, in the absence of consistent guidance and encouragement to use English, group activities may unintentionally shift toward native-language discussion, thereby restricting the development of foreign-language fluency [1, 5, 11].

Task Typology, Relevance, and Communicative Significance:

The structure and characteristics of speaking tasks significantly affected learners' motivation and participation levels [4, 5]. Participants reported a distinct lack of interest in passive, mechanical exercises [4, 5]. Conversely, interviewees demonstrated a clear preference for dynamic, communicative tasks that simulate authentic interaction [1, 4, 5]. For instance, S1 recommended "using role plays about real-life situations" to facilitate natural communication [5], while S2 suggested "debates to help students express their ideas confidently" [5].

Furthermore, participants indicated that collaborative tasks with clearly defined responsibilities enhanced engagement [5, 14]. S3 suggested implementing "group presentations to organize ideas and practice speaking" [5], while S7 recommended "short drama activities to reduce shyness and make speaking fun" [5]. These qualitative findings suggest that task relevance, contextual authenticity, and active communicative roles are essential for maintaining learner engagement and promoting positive attitudes toward group work [1, 4, 5].

Affective Factors: Speaking Anxiety, Shyness, and Fear of Peer Judgment:

Affective variables have been identified as significant psychological determinants of students' communicative participation [5, 6, 10]. While small groups are typically assumed to offer a safe conversational environment, several interviewees reported ongoing anxiety resulting from shyness and apprehension about negative peer evaluation [5, 6, 10]. As S8 stated: "I feel uncomfortable speaking when others are better than me" [5].

Furthermore, emotional comfort was found to depend on the quality of group rapport [5, 6]. S6 noted, "I feel confident only when the group is friendly" [5]. These findings suggest that although group settings may alleviate the stress associated with whole-class performance, speaking anxiety persists unless peers exhibit clear empathy, patience, and non-judgmental acceptance [5, 10, 11].

Influence of Classroom Environment, Noise, and Role Allocation:

External classroom conditions and organizational procedures significantly affected group work productivity [5, 7, 11]. Participants reported that classroom noise, physical disorganization, and off-task conversations were substantial challenges [5, 7, 14]. As S3 stated, "Sometimes we talk about things not related to the lesson... arguments sometimes slow our work" [5].

Furthermore, the lack of clearly assigned roles frequently resulted in an unequal distribution of workload [5, 7, 8]. S7 observed that "some members depend too much on others, so the work is not balanced" [5]. In the absence of designated responsibilities such as leader, timekeeper, note-taker, or speaker, groups often depended on a few diligent members while others remained passive [5, 7, 13]. These findings indicate that effective physical and organizational classroom management is essential for sustaining focused and equitable student participation [5, 11, 13].

Integrated Analysis of Contributing Factors:

A synthesis of the qualitative findings indicates that the factors influencing group participation are highly interrelated rather than independent [5, 10, 11]. The interplay among individual confidence, peer dynamics, and classroom organization determines whether collaborative learning is perceived as empowering or discouraging [5, 6, 7].

A key pedagogical challenge lies in balancing peer collaboration with equitable participation [5, 7, 8]. Although group work aims to promote cooperative dialogue, the absence of structured intervention allows differences in linguistic proficiency to reinforce existing social hierarchies [5, 7, 14]. Proficient students frequently assume leadership roles and dominate discussions, which can inadvertently silence less fluent peers and increase their evaluation anxiety [5, 6, 10]. As a result, less proficient students may resort to using Arabic as a coping mechanism or disengage from group activities entirely [5, 11]. This pattern supports Cooperative Learning Theory, which posits that collaborative success requires positive interdependence and individual accountability, rather than mere physical proximity, to prevent social loafing and dominance by certain members [7, 8, 14].

Moreover, these findings reflect the socio-educational context of Libyan universities [5, 9, 12]. Students educated primarily through teacher-centered approaches that emphasize rote memorization and passive learning often have limited experience with communicative peer interaction [9, 12]. As a result, when placed in unstructured groups, they may lack the interactional strategies required to negotiate meaning, manage time, and resolve conflicts [7, 9, 11].

These results are consistent with previous research in Libyan higher education, which emphasizes that successful collaborative tasks require teacher guidance, clear role definitions, and structured activities [9, 13]. Thus, group work in tertiary EFL classrooms should not be regarded as a self-sustaining method; its instructional effectiveness depends on deliberate task design, systematic monitoring, and proactive teacher support [5, 7, 11].

Pedagogical and Institutional Implications:

The qualitative findings yield several practical implications for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) speaking instruction at Elmergib University and comparable educational settings [5].

- **First**, Systematic Role Distribution: Teachers should explicitly assign rotating functional roles within each group (such as discussion leader, timekeeper, note-taker, and presenter) [5, 7]. Structured roles distribute responsibility equitably, prevent peer domination, and eliminate social loafing [7, 8].
- **Second**, Implementing Meaningful, Task-Based Designs: Language instructors are encouraged to replace unstructured, mechanical discussions with authentic Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) formats, such as situational role plays, classroom debates, problem-solving activities, and short drama simulations [1, 4, 5]. These purposeful activities foster target-language use and minimize off-task behavior [4, 5].
- **Third**, Scaffolding and Managing Language Choices: Instructors should actively establish norms for target-language use [5, 11]. Instead of imposing punitive bans on the native language, educators are advised to provide pre-task linguistic scaffolding, such as essential communicative phrases for clarification, turn-taking, and expressing opinions [4, 7, 11]. Continuous monitoring during group tasks supports students in maintaining English usage [5, 11].
- **Fourth**, Cultivating Psychological Safety: To reduce students' affective filters, instructors should intentionally foster an empathetic and supportive classroom environment [6, 10]. Group composition should be managed by balancing language proficiencies or, when appropriate, grouping students by shared comfort levels to decrease anxiety and encourage participation among less confident learners [5, 7].
- **Finally**, Classroom and Spatial Management: Institutional administrators and educators should address physical classroom factors, such as flexible seating arrangements and noise regulation, to facilitate effective teamwork and promote close peer interaction [5, 11].

Conclusion:

This study investigated the factors influencing EFL students' attitudes toward participation in group work in speaking classes at Elmergib University, with particular emphasis on qualitative findings that address the dissertation's research question. The qualitative data demonstrate that engagement in collaborative speaking tasks arises from a complex interplay of internal and contextual factors, including individual linguistic confidence, prior task preparation, peer dynamics, language choices, task design, affective filters, and classroom conditions.

Although students acknowledge the benefits of peer interaction for enhancing spoken fluency and self-confidence, unstructured group work frequently presents significant challenges. These include dominance by more vocal participants, passive disengagement, anxiety about making mistakes, and excessive reliance on Arabic. The findings indicate that collaborative learning requires structured guidance rather than being approached as an unguided activity.

The instructional effectiveness of group work is contingent upon deliberate pedagogical structuring, clear role allocation, communicative task design, and active teacher facilitation. Addressing these factors enables EFL instructors to create inclusive and productive speaking environments that support university learners in developing authentic communicative competence.

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