

A Preliminary Study on Team Effectiveness among Undergraduates

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Abstract. This paper attempts to determine whether BEL 312 students (English for Occupational Purposes) are very effective, effective or ineffective team members. Questionnaires were distributed to two groups of undergraduate students (a total of 86 respondents) who took BEL 312 subject during class time. The respondents are from the Diploma in Science and Diploma in Accountancy courses. The overall results show that majority of the respondents are ineffective team members since they are not good in their problem solving skills, they are not active listeners and they rarely give positive feedback to other group members. Therefore, effective measures such as effective coaching in classrooms and improving the quality team interaction should be taken in order to ensure they play their roles in a team, so that in the end they can participate well in discussions and be effective team members that can contribute well to the group work as well as improving their soft skills.

Keywords: team work, group work, soft skills, collaborative learning and teaching.

1. Introduction

In today's challenging world, graduates should possess good soft skills, so that they will not face difficulties in the workplace later. One of the ways to achieve this is by letting them work collaboratively in a team in classrooms. Working in a team seems to be an efficient way to promote interaction among undergraduates whereby it improves communication, socializing, thinking and problem solving skills. Many academicians are adopting collaborative teaching and learning methods in their classrooms to ensure undergraduates have the opportunity to interact and share ideas with each other.

This could be seen from the shift from the traditional method of learning (teacher-centered) to the learner-centered method which is widely used in most higher learning institutions nowadays. With the advancement of science and technology, learners today are exposed to the different kinds of techniques in learning and teaching. These learners are given opportunities to explore everything on their own or with the guidance from their teachers or lecturers. One of the learning activities that is adopted by these lecturers or teachers to further enhance learners' skills is working in a team or working collaboratively in a group. According to Tinzmann, Jones, Fennimore, Bakker, Fine & Pierce (1990), there are 4 general characteristics of collaborative classrooms. Those characteristics are shared knowledge and authority among teachers and students, teachers being as mediators and the groupings of groups should be heterogeneous. Teachers are no longer seen as the sole decision makers in the classrooms as students are given chances to express their ideas and implement tasks on certain project assigned to them. Therefore, teachers are referred to as the mediators to support their students' learning and growth. Students with diverse background, skills and experience should be grouped together, so that they can help and learn from each other. By having heterogeneous groups of students will also give them the chances to share knowledge and authority. In the end, there will be better interactions among them.

2. Objectives of the study

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The objectives of the study are:

- 1) To determine students' team effectiveness and
- 2) To compare team effectiveness among Diploma in Accountancy (DIA) and Diploma in Science (DIS) students

3. Methodology

The subjects in this study are semester 4 (Diploma in Accountancy-DIA) and semester 6 (Diploma in Science-DIS) students. These students currently enroll in BEL 312 (English for Occupational Purposes) subject. A total number of 86 students participated in the survey. 45 of them are Accounting students and 41 are Diploma in Science students. There are 4 male students from DIA and 15 from DIS. For female students, there are 41 from DIA and 26 from DIS. Altogether, there are 19 male students and 67 female students. The reason why these students are chosen as the respondents in this study is because they have learnt all the grammar rules and taught the skills required when they were in semesters 1,2 and 3. In semester 1, these students took BEL 120/100 (Consolidating Language Skills/Preparatory English). In semester 2, they took BEL 260 (Intermediate English) and in semester 3 they took BEL 311 (English for Academic Purposes). The skills and knowledge required by them in those semesters are needed to help them function well in their group work for BEL 312 subject.

Questionnaires were distributed to these students during class time. The set of questionnaire that is used in this study was taken from the 'Team work skills questionnaire' from the University of South Australia. The students were given about 10 minutes to answer the questions in the questionnaire. There are 15 questions altogether in the set and these students had to choose an answer which likely to describe them when working in a group. The questionnaires were distributed at the beginning of the semester since these students have worked in groups in their other English classes before during their previous study semester. After the students answered the questionnaires, the questionnaires were collected and data were analyzed.

4. Literature review

The shift from the traditional method of teaching and learning (teacher-centered) to the contemporary method of teaching and learning (student-centered) has greatly benefited learners and educators in general. Living in the 21st century has made anything possible with the advancement of science and technology. Educators no longer have the sole control of what is going to be taught and learnt in the classrooms. Most of the time, things are shared with the learners. Educators themselves sometimes learn from the learners who are technology savvy. Learners are also encouraged to go on-line for supplementary exercises and do on-line quizzes on their own to complement what they learn in their class. One of the teaching and learning methods that is adopted and implemented by educators in the classrooms today is collaborative teaching and learning.

There are many terms used to describe the term 'collaborative learning' such as cooperative learning, working in a team, community of practice and working in a group. Collaborative learning happens when students help each other to do their homework. It can happen in schools when they do work together or when they participate in an on-line forum at a different place. In contrast, cooperative learning happens when students do their work together at the same place on any project assigned to them. Collaborative and co-operative learning help students to work together to complete the assigned task rather than competing with each other (http://www.thirteen.org/edonline/concept2class/coopcollab/index_sub1.html). Team work is defined by Brown (2001) as a group skill, being able to get along with others and be well liked. "Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly." (Wenger, 2006)

Gokhale (1995) defines the term 'collaborative learning' as an instruction method in which students regardless of their performance levels work together in small groups to achieve a common goal. The students are responsible for each other's learning besides theirs. Therefore, the success of one student will help the others in the group to be successful as well.

In addition, Delucci (2006) states that students preferred to work collaboratively in a group as this enables them to exchange ideas and opinions. At the same time they can perform better as they are less

anxious comparing when working alone. Anis, Mahani, Latisha, Nazira & Surina (2009) in their research on undergraduates' preference for collaborative learning activities find that 92.6% of the total 162 students preferred to work collaboratively. In addition, they also find that male and female students did not have a low level of preference for collaborative learning during English lesson. In summary, this shows that both male and female students generally preferred collaborative learning.

Another study by Surina, Latisha Asmaak, Mahani, Nazira & Anis (2010) on lecturers' preference towards collaborative activities in their classrooms show most of the respondents prefer to implement collaborative activities in their classrooms. The reasons that they give for implementing this teaching method in their classrooms are collaborative learning promotes learners' progress, improves learners' interaction skills, encourages learners' intrinsic motivation and also this activity creates collaborative environment in learning.

Furthermore, being able to share ideas and communicate them effectively are the examples of soft skills required in graduates to secure a good job upon graduation. The same goes to working in a group. This is because working in groups enables team members to play their roles as a leader and also as a contributor to ensure group's success. However, today many of our local graduates do not have good communication and problem solving skills. That is why many employers prefer to recruit graduates overseas. According to Shamsuddin Barhan as cited by Quah, Aizat, Guok & Ignatius (2009), "Overseas graduates performed much better than local graduates... overseas education system focused more on soft skills. For instance, when an overseas graduate encounters problems in the office, he or she is better equipped to solve them." Because of this, educators should do something to ensure that their students can compete in the work place later with other overseas graduates who are good in their soft skills. Students themselves should also realize on this issue and take their own initiatives to further enhance their soft skills. Otherwise, they cannot survive in today's competitive world.

Latisha Asmaak and Surina (2010) on their research on 'employability awareness on Malaysian undergraduates' find that the second most important employability skill chosen by the respondents in their study was 'team work.' Team work here includes working as an individual or a member of a team, coaching and mentoring. Personal attributes like loyalty, commitment, honesty, integrity, enthusiasm, reliability, personal presentation common sense, positive self-esteem, a sense of humor, motivation, adaptability, a balanced attitude to work and home life and ability to deal with pressure were chosen by the respondents as the most important employability skills.

Oakley, Hanna, Kuzymyn & Felder (2007) find 4349 students from the total 6435 students who participated in the study, worked in teams. For those who worked in teams, they agreed that the course they took had achieved its learning objectives. Their results of the study also suggest that allowing students to work in teams can lead to learning benefits and student satisfaction.

Mahon (2008) in his findings from his pilot research through interviews done to the fellow Chief Information Officers (CIO) who are employed by the companies in the North Eastern Ohio find show those officers agreed that it was important to develop sustainable ways to improve teamwork performance. They also addressed the importance of emotional intelligence and shared vision in order to further enhance the effects of teamwork performance.

According to Stenzel & Kübler (2005), "Female and male performance differ most in mixed teams with revenue sharing between the team members, as men put in significantly more effort than women. The data also indicate that women perform best when competing in pure female teams against male teams whereas men perform best when women are present or in a competitive environment."

Abdolmehdi & Mohammad Javad (2007) discover 35.2% of the students who participated in their study on language learning style preferences liked to work individually as compared to other styles of learning such as working in pairs, in small and large groups. This finding shows that students preferred to work either with partners or in groups and they disliked working alone.

5. Findings and discussion

There are 86 students who took their BEL 312 subject involved in the study. 45 of them are from the Diploma in Accountancy (DIA) program and the remaining 41 are from the Diploma in Science (DIS) program. There are 19 male students from both programs (4 from DIA, 15 from DIS) and 67 female students (41 from DIA and 26 from DIS). Table 1 shows the scores between DIA and DIS students on the overall scores on teamwork.

Table 1 –Scores between DIA and DIS students

SCORE (description)	PROGRAM CODE	
	Diploma in Accountancy (DIA)	Diploma in Science (DIS)
↓ 35 (useful if you worked on some of your team skills)	29 (25F,4M)=64.4%	22 (13F, 9M)=53.7%
35-40 (effective team person)	13 (F)=28.9%	14 (11F, 3M)=34.1%
40-45(a very effective team person)	3 (F)=6.7%	5 (2F, 3M)=12.1%
TOTAL	45 (41F, 4M)=100%	41 (26F,15M)=100%

Table 1 shows the differences in scores between both programs. DIA (64.4%) has a higher score as compared to DIS (53.7%) in terms of its students' team effectiveness. 28.9% of DIA students are effective team members as compared to 22% for DIS students. However, DIS students are better in their team effectiveness as compared to DIA students (5 to 3). The overall score shows that DIS students (34.1%+12.1%=46.2%) are better in their teamwork as compared to DIA students (28.9%+6.7%=35.6%).

Table 2- The total overall score for both programs

SCORE	Total number of students (DIA/DIS)
↓ 35	51=59.3%
35-40	27=31.3%
40-45	8=9.3%
TOTAL	86=100%

Table 2 shows the overall score for both programs. There are 86 respondents for the study. 51 (59.3%) of them have the score below 35 which means that they are ineffective team members. 27 (31.3%) of them are in the score between 35-40 which means that they are effective team members and 8 (9.3%) of them who are under the score between 40-45 are very effective team members. The overall score shows that the respondents are ineffective team members (59.3%). Only 40.6% (31.3% + 9.3%) of the respondents are effective team members.

Table 3- Female and Male scores

Score	Male	Female
↓ 35	13	38
35-40	3	24
40-45	3	5
TOTAL	19 (19/86x100=22.1%)	67 (67/86x100=77.9%)

Table 3 is on the female and male scores on their team effectiveness. There are 19(22.1%) male respondents and 67(77.9%) female respondents who participated in the study. Most female and male respondents are ineffective team members. 13 male respondents and 38 female respondents scored below 35. From the overall score, it can be concluded that female are more effective than male in their team work. There are 6 male respondents with the score between 35-40 and 29 female respondents with the score between 35-40.

The overall conclusion that can be made from the findings is learners are ineffective team members. One of the disadvantages of working in a group is having less contribution from any of the group members.

The term 'free rider' is always used to refer to this person. According to Kerr and Bruun as cited by Roberts and McInnerney (2007), this free rider who does not contribute well to the group work in the end will affect the overall group performance since the group is not able to perform to its fullest potential. They further state that there will also be a 'sucker' who is the opposite of the free rider in the group who is regarded as other group members to be the most capable and reliable person to carry out the group task.

In addition, the respondents in the study also have problems in offering information and giving opinions. Besides, they also rarely give positive feedback to other members in the group. When problem arises in the group, they also have problems in identifying what has happened. Therefore, they are unable to resolve the conflicts that they have. One of the factors that contributes to this situation is lack of motivation of participation. Some of the group members are reluctant to participate in the group work and are uncommitted to the group aim (Davis, 2009).

6. Recommendations

To ensure learners' teamwork spirit is improved, teachers should support learners in their learning. This is because anxiety in language learning may hinder students from learning. Shufen, Zohreh and Rou-Jui (2010) in their study of 158 adult Taiwanese learning English indicate that learners' anxiety decrease when their teachers support them academically. This means language learners are more effective learners when they feel more comfortable with their teachers in constructive and less stressful learning environment. In this study, the learners prefer to have teachers' support rather than their peer support in learning English. Therefore, by having warm and supportive relationship with students, teachers would help to facilitate students into becoming more effective language learners.

Besides, working in a team requires the group members to have an explicit decision making process. Therefore, the team members should cooperate in order to meet their shared objective. Oandasan et al (2006) believe that by sacrificing their autonomy, the team members allow their activity to be coordinated by the team either through the decisions made by the team leader or through the shared decision making process. In the end, the group is able to achieve its goals because of the group commitment and at the same time will be able to manage conflicts that may arise.

7. Conclusion

In order to ensure active participation from the students in their group/team work, students themselves need to contribute their ideas and try to do their best to ensure active participation from all besides the guide from their teachers. This is to ensure the group objective is achieved and conflicts can be avoided. Since the current trend in teaching and learning now is moving towards learner-centered approach, learners are no longer seen as passive participants and teachers act as moderators to facilitate learning.

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