

## INCORPORATING SUSTAINED PROJECT-BASED GROUP WORK INTO THE EFL CLASSROOM: CRITICAL REFLECTIONS FROM TWO TERTIARY EFL INSTRUCTORS

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### **Abstract**

*This paper uses critical reflection as a framework for two tertiary EFL instructors to engage in reflective practice of their professional decisions related to implementing sustained project-based group work. The authors each describe one critical incident stemming from their semester-long group work interactions with their students. They then position each incident within the larger sociocultural context of the academia and professional world in Macao. Included in this deconstruction are the assumptions each instructor brought with her into her classroom. Analyzing these assumptions together with their critical reflection allows each author to achieve a better understanding of decisions made inside and outside of their classrooms and how these decisions impact group work activities.*

**Keywords:** *critical reflection, group work.*

### **Introduction.**

To improve our craft, all teachers should engage in some form of reflection. How often that reflection occurs and in what form that reflection occurs is the focus of this paper. The authors present the critical reflections of our classroom practices as two tertiary instructors with some general background knowledge of our students and their educational contexts. The authors situate this paper within critical theory because we recognize the need for all instructors to engage in some level of greater understanding of our roles as teachers in society and how we reinforce and propel certain social practices. We engage in this critical reflection so that others may become more cognizant of the consequences of their actions, not necessarily to effect some type of a change in their worldviews, but to necessitate similar critical practices in their own contexts as a means of improving their teaching. We draw on the theoretical works of Freire (2000) and Habermas (1984) but we also put critical reflection into practice as informed by the works of Brookfield (1995) and Hickson (2011). To illustrate how other teachers can engage in critical reflection, we use our experience of conducting project-based group work in our English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms at the University of Macau.

In the following, we first discuss our understandings of collaborative learning and why we wanted to incorporate this aspect into our classrooms. We then each pinpoint a critical incident that spurred us to conduct this critical reflection, followed by an analysis of the assumptions the authors each made about our students in relation to group work. We discuss these assumptions in relation to background knowledge, values, and perceived social structure. Finally, we discuss how we both benefited from this critical reflective exercise and how other instructors may benefit from this exercise as well.

### **Collaborative Learning and Our Teaching Context**

#### **Applying Our L2 Expertise to Our Teaching Context**

As more research emerges on the benefits of collaborative or cooperative learning for classroom purposes, instructors teaching at all levels and in different contexts are seeking ways to maximize these benefits for their students. Shimazoe and Aldrich (2010) identify possible benefits of cooperative learning, the first of which is that it helps students gain different perspectives. Other benefits include helping students become independent learners, develop social skills, gain critical thinking skills, and earn better grades. From primary to tertiary education, from geography to

English as a foreign language (EFL) classes, many teachers have incorporated some type of collaborating learning into an integral component of their students' course work. From theory to practice, information on how best to implement collaborative learning abound (see Jacobs, Lee, & Ball, 1997 and Slavin, 1994 for suggested classroom activities that foster collaborative learning). However, the dynamics of a language learning classroom are different in the sense that there are more variables the instructor should consider, including differences in gender, age, and most importantly, language proficiency (Dörnyei&Malderez, 1997). Nunan's (1992) edited volume on both the teaching and learning aspects of collaborative learning sheds light on the factors that instructors need to consider before implementing collaborative learning in their language learning classrooms.

The central focus of Nunan's (1992) volume rests on the English as a second language (ESL) context and continues the exploration of second language acquisition (SLA) research on group work. In this context, group work has been shown to have many benefits, including increased opportunities for students to practice the target language, negotiate understanding among students with different levels of proficiency, develop intrinsic motivation, and improve target language accuracy (Long & Porter, 1985; Jacob, Rottenberg, Patrick, & Wheeler, 1996; Sachs, Candlin, Rose, & Shum, 2003). However, these research studies have either focused on short, discontinuous types of group work that center on one specific classroom task or the impact of group work on the language of L2 learners when paired with L1 users. Implementing sustained, project-based group work is complicated by factors such as students' ability to manage time and schedules, group member personalities, and communication styles, all of which impact the group work dynamic.

### **Our Teaching Context**

The University of Macau (UM) is in the middle of a transitional period. The university is moving into a General Education (GE) curriculum. The concept of a GE curriculum is new to almost all of the faculty and staff at the university. The changes include a switch from language classes for the sake of language classes, to language classes as a means to prepare UM learners' communicative competence for their future endeavors, be it employment or graduate school. In many ways, the general curriculum at the university is moving towards a focus on how well the students learn instead of how well the teachers teach (Kuh, 2003). This general shift follows the changes U.S. institutions have undergone over the course of the past decade to a focus on "engagement" with the learned materials (Kuh, 2003). The idea of engagement is supposed to add "to the foundation of skills and dispositions that is essential to live a productive, satisfying life after college" (Kuh, 2003, p. 25). The goal of the University of Macau is to empower their students to have these skills of success and language classes have become part of the key to achieving these goals.

The English Language Centre (ELC) at UM is responsible for teaching the entire student body English at some point during their academic career. The courses run by the ELC meet for an hour and a half, twice a week, every week for 15 weeks. Each class is composed of students from different periods of study (i.e. first year-fourth year) and a variety of disciplines. The language backgrounds of the students vary; however, the majority of students are speakers of Cantonese or Mandarin. Most of the students are female and either come from mainland China or are local and from Macao. The local students occasionally have had exposure to the style of group work done in the ELC, but many of the mainland students have not used group work in the same context, if at all. Both authors for this article have both been educated in the United States and use activities and ideas frequently found in a western style classroom.

As previously mentioned, the language classes at UM have transitioned from a more segregated skills approach to learning to learning a language with communication as the objective. The way that this is accomplished has been guided by a change in the general goals. The ELC has altered the goals and objectives of their courses by adding several new components. These components include recognizing group work as a skill students will need in order to be successful in a work environment and implementing sustained project-based group work. The following section

discusses the pedagogical concerns taken into consideration as group work was integrated into the classroom to fulfill the university requirements.

### **Equipping EFL Students with Necessary Skills for Effective Group Work**

Effective group work requires a certain level of common understanding among all group members, and this type of information may not be taught in an EFL classroom where the concern is mostly on language skills rather than group work skills. For example, everyone in a group should have the group's best interest as its first priority (Williams, 2007). Other knowledge may include specific tasks that need to be carried out during group meetings (Balasooriya, 2009, di Corpo & Hawkins, 2010). Proceeding to implement sustained, project-based group work without teaching students how they are expected to behave can have disastrous consequences (Balasooriya, 2009, di Corpo & Hawkins, 2010; Davies, 2009). Common student complaints resulting in a reluctance to participate in cooperative learning may include the perception that group work wastes their time, drags down their grade, and is difficult to manage because of their schedules (Shimazoe & Aldrich, 2010). All of these concerns are valid and need to be addressed by the instructor to create an atmosphere that encourages successful collaboration.

One of the foremost skills students need to increase the chances that their collaborative effort will be positive is how to build consensus. To help students understand that effective collaboration takes conscious effort by all parties involved, they were introduced to an activity called "Lost on the Moon" (Lucas, 2004). Originally developed by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), this activity allows students to see the difference in results between individual and group work. If all guidelines are followed, students often arrive at a result much closer to the model answers provided by NASA than if they were to complete the task alone. Improved scores are reached through open discussion and the pooling of information from all group members as well as restrictions on voting and bargaining, which are shortcuts students often take to avoid critically analyzing the information they have on hand.

Another skill that beginner collaborators need to learn is that group work requires each member to carry out specific duties. Lucas (2004) refers to these assignments as procedural, task, and maintenance needs. Procedural needs include meeting logistics such as setting agendas and taking notes. Task needs comprise of helping the group to focus on the agreed upon agenda and reach consensus. Maintenance needs involve establishing an environment where group members feel included, supported, and proud. Cohn (1999) also supports the idea of assigning specific roles for group members. Doing so may help prevent the problem of the unequal division of work or the possibility that a particular member may be unwilling to contribute to the group work (Davies, 2009). Students who have little experience working with the same group for an extended period of time can be assigned specific roles that address Lucas's procedural, task, and maintenance needs of a group. These roles may include a leader who organizes meetings, a taskmaster who helps the group stay on task, a cheerleader who supports ideas generated by the group, and a note taker who records group discussion. These roles may or may not be rotated, depending on how much experience students have with collaboration (Rosser, 1998).

After instructors have introduced and taught these skill sets, students can incorporate the appropriate language to use during discussions. Goodale (1987) and Lubetsky, Lebeau, and Harrington (1999) provide useful and effective phrases to use for various contexts, including how to disagree, agree, concede, and draw conclusions. For English language learners, it is particularly important that the instructor schedule regular class time to allow students to practice the target language. Shimazoe and Aldrich (2010) caution that instructors who do not allot class time for group discussions and decisions risk students losing interest in the group project. Due to students' different schedules, it may be next to impossible for students to meet on their own. For a group of language learners who all share a common first language, it would be unreasonable to expect that the group meeting outside the classroom would use English to carry out their discussion. Hence, scheduling regular group discussion times in class has both the advantage of keeping student interest and allowing students to practice the language of discussion.

### **Assessing Group Work**

Evaluation is often one of the areas that students cite for not wanting to participate in group work. “It’s not fair,” they say, “one or two people do all the work and the others do nothing” is a common complaint. These statements are what make evaluation a crucial aspect of group work. In order to heighten the likelihood of success with group work in the classroom, students need to have ownership of as much of the process as possible and feel as if they still have an individual voice (Balasooriya, di Corpo, & Hawkins, 2010; Davies, 2009). The evaluation devised for the project-based group work at the ELC allows students this voice by encouraging and requiring students to give feedback about how the group functioned as a unit, and the role that their group-mates played in the completion of the assignment.

In order to meet the above criteria, the individual portion of the group work grade is determined in several ways. First, the project’s worth as a percentage of the overall grade is determined. A project might be worth 30% of the overall course grade. This 30% would then be broken into weights depending on the difficulty of each portion of the project. For example, if the students were completing a podcast exploring a theme, the first graded rubric might be the podcast script and worth 20%. The second graded rubric might be the recording of the podcast worth 10%. Each of these percentage breakdowns would then be broken down further. In other words, every time the students receive a grade from the teacher, the students also have the opportunity to grade their group-mates and themselves. This group and self grade is worth 10% of the overall score for that project. For example, when grading the podcast script, the teacher would be grading 90% of the weight, and the students would be grading 10% of the weight. Another way to look at this is out of the 20% weight that the script has towards the final project grade, the teacher grades 90% and the students, 10%.

According to research, the self and group member assessment encourages students to maintain commitment to working together to produce the project (Davies, 2009). This lowers the risk that some members of the group will not be as active as others in two ways. First, the students are aware that they will be graded by their group members. This encourages them to fully engage in the project so that their group members will give them a good grade. Secondly, the students feel that their opinions and time are valued by the teacher and that if there is a problem within the group, there is a way to deal with it (Davies, 2009).

### **Critical Incidents**

According to Brookfield (1995), critical incidents serve as the basis on which critical reflection occurs. As such, it is important for all instructors to identify moments in their teaching when something happens outside of the instructor’s anticipated results. Critical incidents typically spur reflection. To elevate reflection to critical reflection, however, Hickson (2011) suggests that practitioners situate the reflection “in the contexts of knowledge, power and reflexivity to deconstruct how assumptions are influenced by social and structural assumptions” (p. 833). In the following, the authors each present one critical incident where their assumptions about group work were challenged. These two critical incidents will be used as a platform on which we discuss the assumptions we made about our students that may have led to the critical incident.

### **Just Passing**

My critical incident occurred in the second semester after we initiated group projects in the upper level courses. About midway through the process of the project, and after the groups had all completed their first presentation, I noticed that one group seemed agitated. I asked the group what was causing the agitation but they all said everything was fine. During the interaction, one of the group members, a third year male student, turned his back to me and the group. Interpreting the conversation, it appeared that everything was not fine, but that the students did not want to discuss whatever was troubling them. Several weeks later, one of the group’s members came to my office during office hours and explained. The third year student was unwilling to do any work. They had tried everything that they could think of to use social pressure to encourage him to work, but he refused. The group member mentioned that they felt powerless because he was a year older and

from a different major. I approached the third year student individually about the group's concerns, keeping who had spoken with me a secret. The third year student explained to me that upon graduation he knew he would become a civil servant in Macao and only had to pass the course (50% is passing) to graduate and get a job. I suggested that as a civil servant he will need to work in groups. He said that it did not matter: he was only in it for the money and would just go along with the group. I tried again by stating that many of the civil servant jobs in Macau were competitive and that hard work and continual self development had helped several of my friends rise to better positions within the government. The student repeated that he had no desire to do anything more than necessary to pass. To be fair to the other group members, I told him I would grade him only for the part that he completed. All group participants filled out the peer evaluation forms and I was surprised that the group gave him what I thought to be generous marks of "average" even though he did not participate. I expected them to give him a "poor" mark.

### **Faking It**

My critical incident centers around several observations of one particularly close group of friends who chose to work together for a project. This group of students all came from the same year and the same major. Each time this group was given a task, they seemed to spend very little time discussing the task as compared to other groups. It seemed as if they had reached a tacit understanding that they were just going to get through the tasks as quickly as possible so that they could use any extra time saved in class to get ahead. For instance, each time they were given a specific scaffolding task related to the project, there would be very little discussion among the group members. Mostly, the leader would make the decisions. The other group members quickly concurred so they could move on to the next question or activity. Whenever I came by to check on their work, all group members would contribute something to the discussion to appear as if they were really engaged with the activity. As soon as I left, however, they would go back to moving through the small tasks quickly. At times, I would glance back at that group while working with another group, and I would see that the group in question would take turns to study for their other examinations. It appeared to me that they were all very committed to the same goal of getting through the activities quickly. They did not seem to value discussion, which I thought was the best use of class time. I thought this was a one-off incident, especially since it seemed that they were all studying for a mid-term that appeared to count for a high percentage of their grade for another class. However, over the next several class periods, I continued to see the same behavior in this group. Each group member took turns to multi-task for other classes. As a result, I found myself often frustrated by the lack of genuine participation by the members of this group.

### **Deconstructing the Critical Incidents**

#### **Reflecting on "Just Passing"**

This incident has so many layers to it that it could be a paper in itself. Because of this, I will only analyze several of the lessons learned that stood out to me immediately after the incident. I assumed that social pressure from the group would force a disengaged student into working. This assumption was based on my experience learning about the strength of the collective mentality in Chinese culture in graduate school in the U.S. and my understanding of the high competitiveness of Chinese students with their studies and desire to succeed based on my three years teaching in Mainland China.

The first breakdown stemmed from the his age and the students being a different major. It did not occur to me that these would have made as big an impact. In hindsight, I can see that the age of group participants would be important to the group. Culturally in Macao, respect comes with age. It is not likely that you would find younger people making suggestions to their elders. However, I did not realize that within the undergraduate program at the university age would have an impact. This was short sighted on my part because, on analysis, I realized that power distance associated with age also impacted me when I was an undergraduate. I was very conscious of those that were older than me and would, at times, defer to them as someone with more experience and knowledge when working in a group.

Being from a different major and in a different group of university students was also a factor in the group dynamic I had not considered. I thought, *they are all undergraduate students, they will get together and work*. At the time of the critical incident, students from the same majors were grouped together and outside of English classes, they had very little interaction with those that were not in the same major. This has the potential to create an “us” versus “them” mentality that may have been partly responsible for this situation. The other group members were all in the same class and from the same major. They would be together for the next three years of study and had more pressure to get along.

Finally, I was completely unprepared for a student to only want to pass at 50% of the total mark. It goes against everything that I have been taught coming from a middle class anglosaxon background in an individualistic culture like the U.S. where you are expected to do your best. It had never even occurred to me that someone would just like to slide by when they are exceptionally smart. From what he explained to me, Macao residents are pretty much guaranteed a decently paid job as a civil servant. There are many incentives from the government to ensure that they are generally well taken care of. While this is partially true in that the casino and hospitality industry ensure that many of the residents will get a job upon graduation, a job as a civil servant is not guaranteed. It is possible that he had connections and that his family would take care of him no matter what happened with the job and regardless of how he did in school. The student understood that the education did not matter and that relationships and family did so that he put his efforts into nurturing relationships rather than working on an education. I am still struggling with this.

#### **Reflecting on “Faking It”**

In the past, I have avoided random groupings because I felt that it would be better to give students the right to choose who their collaborative partners would be. However, in allowing students to choose their own group members, what I have observed is that they tend to only want to work with their friends. Although this result in itself is not problematic, deeper issues that contribute to the lack of effectiveness of group work often happens. Overall, I had made a number of assumptions about my students’ commitment to group work.

First, I assumed that students would appreciate the opportunity to discuss their ideas in class. It is often difficult for students with full timetables to arrange meetings outside of class, so I felt it was imperative to build group work time into our regular class meetings. I did not anticipate that some students would not be invested at all with their group work. Like my co-author, I assumed that positive peer pressure would be enough to keep the students on task and focused on their projects. In essence, the students did not value the discussion time as much as I had. I wanted the students to focus on the process of group work and to learn from these processes, but the students just wanted to focus on the results and did not particularly care how those results were achieved.

Second, I had underestimated how sophisticated the students’ performances of “doing school” had become (Goffman, 1959). This group of students did everything I had requested. They went through the motions of brainstorming, discussing, and questioning. On the surface, they had completed all of the requisite tasks, but the element of genuine commitment was missing. When they were discussing ideas, the looks on their faces told me that they just wanted to get through the task. They were not interested in the actual words they were speaking. From my observation of the students’ level of commitment, I realized that the gap between the underlying purpose of a teacher-designed task and the actual student performance of the task can sometimes be much greater than anticipated and hence, disturbing.

Third, I thought I had done enough work to convince this group of students of the value of group work and collaboration. In class, we completed a few tasks that demonstrated to students how discussion can be enriched through various perspectives and how better decisions can be made with more information contributed by different people. What the students’ behavior informed me, however, is that they understood the value of having to perform group work because it was what I wanted to see. Even if they had understood the benefits of collaboration, they did not necessarily want to invest their time doing the group project that I had assigned.

### **Learning from Critical Reflection**

#### **Lessons Learned from “Just Passing”**

I feel that the lesson about age and social grouping was probably the easiest of the lessons. What this showed me was that I could and should relate to the students concerns about grouping by accessing some of my previous experiences as a student at their age. And that, coming from the South of the U.S., I held similar beliefs in my personal practice of power differentials that come with age. By tapping into these similarities, I was able to make changes to the way that I spoke to students about their roles as group members with each other to try to engage a higher sense of connection between students of different majors and ages. An example of this was showing through activities that led to a whole class reflection on how each group member had knowledge special to their discipline that might be helpful for the group. My colleagues and I also tried to create projects for the group that were inclusive of all majors. For example, students were tasked with putting together a “university.” The group had to come up with all aspects of the university including finances, management structure, campus design, logos, etc. These steps, in addition to running ideas by student helpers as cultural informants, helped to resolve this issue. I have found that since going through this process of critical reflection, my analysis and work outside of the classroom has had a positive impact in the classroom.

The lessons that I learned with the student who did not what to do any more work than necessary are still in progress. For me, the biggest impact was that I felt disassociated with the student in a way that bothered me. I found myself struggling to keep an open mind about him and not attach a label. What I realized from this struggle is that part of my job was to ensure that the students are so engaged in the activities that they have a high level of motivation. His lack of motivation may have also been a reflection on the activity itself and my ability to communicate why we were doing group work in a way that grabbed his attention. This led me to work on the way that I communicated how and why we were doing activities that seemed to be more effective. The student came from a well-off background and I learned that class may impact learners in a similar way across cultures and that the relationships in those cases may matter more than school work because they are already assured a future. From this, I learned that creating stronger relationships with the students can be one way to engage learners from this background. This would, hopefully, help recontextualize the activity so that they were doing it for someone they care to impress or make happy rather than a grade. This is a clearly complicated approach when one considers how to create these relationships with the hundreds of students they have every semester in a meaningful and appropriate way. However, having spent years reflecting on this incident, when I had a class, several years later, of many students who held beliefs similar to the third year student, I was able to navigate them through the process in a more engaging way.

#### **Lessons Learned from “Faking It”**

Overall, deconstructing critical incidents such as this one has helped me to see a number of layers in any type of group work activity. On this specific incident, I could choose to see my students’ performances as them not caring enough to engage in genuine group discussion to improve their project. From a different perspective, however, my students could have also simply not cared enough to even go through the motions of pretending to have a discussion. From their performances, I understood that they did care about something. It could have been their grades, my evaluation of their student identities, or their desire to appear cooperative to the other students in class, among others. Their willingness to perform for my benefit informs me that I could have done more to tap into this reaction.

When teacher-designed activities do not have the anticipated results, my first reaction is often to suggest that the students should be more focused, pay more attention, ask more questions, and the like. While the above remains true, what I need to pay more attention to as an instructor is to understand what my students’ priorities are. Not everyone enrolled in my English language class shares the same level of investment. Even if the group work activities have worked successfully in the past with other students in terms of getting them to buy into the idea of collaboration, this past

success does not necessarily mean that current students will buy into the idea of collaboration. Additionally, even if students understand the benefits of collaboration, they may not see a need for this collaboration, as exemplified by the group of students I observed. The challenge that is left for the instructor is to understand the reasons behind the students' classroom behavior. While understanding does not necessarily mean that the instructor has to make changes to her classroom practices, it can lead to more clarity and appreciation of the complexities that influence student behavior and decisions.

### **Conclusion.**

Reflecting on critical incidents that occur in the classroom is a powerful way to transform teaching practice so that the classroom is more effective, but also so that when a university and curriculum goes through a time of change, as teachers, we can take active part in assisting our students and ourselves through the change. By practicing the art of reflection and taking a step back to look at what happened and what it means from a more distant viewpoint, we empower not only ourselves to continually evolve and change in a positive way, but we create space for our students to engage more thoroughly. It was our hope to inspire and entice other teachers into the art of critical reflection since it has made such a positive impact on our teaching and, through our teaching, our students.

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