

STRATEGIES FOR ENHANCING GROUP LEARNING IN MIDDLE SCHOOL EFL  
CLASSES IN CHINA

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Abstract

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Under the Supervision of Dr. Dong Isbister

This paper investigates group learning strategies in Chinese middle EFL classes to help improve students' group learning experience. First, it reviews existing literature on group learning in English as a Foreign Language education. Then, it discusses the limitations of current group learning strategies. Finally, it provides some suggestions for teachers to design more impactful group activities.

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## **Chapter I Introduction**

In middle school EFL education in China, group learning is used to foster student interaction and improve students' language skills. Middle school English teachers in China use group learning by forming small teams for diverse language activities like discussions, role-plays, problem-solving, and group projects. These are designed to enhance practical language use. However, the application often lacks in-depth learning and effective interaction. Therefore, improving group learning to truly strengthen students' group learning and interaction is crucial for enhancing the effectiveness of China EFL teaching in China.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The paper aims to study how to optimize group learning experience in middle school EFL classes in China. It will answer the following questions,

1. What are the limitations of existing group work strategies in middle school EFL classes in China?
2. What group learning strategies will help boost students' group learning and interaction?

### **Definition of Terms**

**Group Learning:** Group learning is a teaching approach for learners to share information and work in organized groups to achieve a mutual goal. It helps learners to cooperate in structured groups so that they can achieve collective objectives during classroom activities.

**Interaction:** Communication among language learners may facilitate language acquisition. For instance, language learners often start to interact in a second language (L2) as they did as children when they were learning their first language (Alfares, 2017, p. 2). In this paper, interaction is used to refer to communication between students, which may facilitate

language acquisition by mirroring the way learners interacted when acquiring their first language.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This study aims to explore effective group learning strategies in middle school EFL classes in China. It discusses challenges, benefits of group learning, and recommends strategies to improve students' interaction and communication skills while they do group work.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study explores ways in which group learning and effective student interaction in middle school EFL classes in China can be enhanced. Additionally, this study offers strategies to teachers in designing more effective group activities, promoting innovation and development in middle school EFL education in China.

### **Delimitation of the Study**

The study focuses on group learning strategies in middle school EFL classes in China. In particular, it explores the impact of teachers' roles, student interactions, and teaching strategies on learning outcomes. It does not extend to other subjects.

### **Methodology**

This study conducts library research by using keywords to search across selected databases for literature pertinent to group learning in foreign language acquisition. It critically evaluates and analyzes publications in academic journals, policy reports, and case studies relevant to group learning. It also recommends strategies for improvement in teaching practice.

## **Chapter II Review of Literature**

Group learning is vital in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education. It enhances student learning, helps improve communication skills, and increases their interest in learning. However, this approach also encounters challenges like uneven contributions from students, anxiety, and distractions.

### **Teacher-Led Discussion in Group Learning**

In exploring language teaching strategies, the role of teachers in group learning settings is crucial. They have a profound impact on students' interaction and engagement. At the same time, group learning can relieve students' anxiety and improve their performance and mood in English learning education.

Chen and Long (2024) conducted an in-depth study on the impact of teacher-led discussion in an English learning environment for Chinese students. They found that teacher-led discussions provided a well-targeted and structured learning environment. In this environment, students could follow the guidance of teachers and have in-depth discussions on specific topics, effectively avoiding distraction. This type of focused discussion promoted students' systematic understanding and mastery of English knowledge.

Furthermore, Pica (1994) highlighted the key role of teacher-led teaching in building a solid foundation and guiding the direction. Through the teacher's guidance, the potential problems of insufficient concentration or clarity in the group discussion were solved. Teachers could guide the discussion and provide timely clarification to ensure effective interaction between students. The two studies emphasized the importance of teachers to participate in group learning.



## **Emotional Regulation in Group Learning**

In addition to the role of teachers in group learning, emotional regulation cannot be ignored because students' anxiety may affect their learning experience. Johnson (1989) studied the psychology of foreign language learning, especially the psychological factor of anxiety. Johnson pointed out that anxiety was prevalent in foreign language learning and often became a major obstacle for many learners. Anxiety may interfere with students' concentration, reduce their memory and comprehension, and even affect their interest and motivation in learning a foreign language. To alleviate this psychological burden on students, Johnson proposed a method of group learning. He believed that group learning provided students with a relaxing and friendly learning environment and reduced anxiety in their interactions with peers. In the group, students could encourage and help each other to face difficulties and challenges in learning together.

Crandall (1999) also confirmed the positive effect of group learning on reducing students' anxiety. When students were in a group learning environment, they tended to be more relaxed and confident in expressing their ideas. Crandall (1999) noted that group learning provided a safe environment for students to explore and discuss knowledge in a small area. In such an environment, students did not have to feel as stressed out as they do in front of the class, thus reducing their anxiety. In addition, due to the mutual trust and respect among the group members, students were more willing to share their ideas and insights, which further enhanced their self-confidence and motivation to learn. This interactive way of learning was easier and more conducive to learning than the traditional teacher-centered classroom.

## **Benefits of Group Learning**

Group learning can improve students' communication, attitude, motivation, and English grammar skills.

Alfares (2017) found that students could communicate at a mutually understandable level, effectively discussing assigned work and trying to resolve differences in learning. In addition, students received valuable feedback from peers and were more receptive to corrections from their classmates. What is more, learners' familiarity with misunderstandings about specific aspects of the target language by other members of the group often promoted mutual assistance and collaboration in the learning process. These findings provide further evidence of the important role of group learning in facilitating effective student learning and communication.

Gomleksi et al. (2007) explored the impact of group learning on students' attitude towards EFL learning and revealed its significant role in promoting learning interaction. They found that when students worked in small groups, they were more interested. Students could discuss and share ideas freely with each other to deepen their understanding of the English language. They may have more interest in talking with each other and are willing to share their experience. This interactive way of learning not only stimulated students' interest in learning, but also enabled them to improve their English in a relaxed and pleasant atmosphere. Through communication and cooperation, students could participate in learning activities more actively, thus improving the learning effect.

Liao et al. (2005) showed that group learning significantly improved students' motivation and English grammar skills compared to learning independently. Learning in groups provided students with more opportunities for interaction and a sense of fun and accomplishment during the learning process, thus enhancing their motivation to learn. In addition, group learning

provided students with rich practice and practice opportunities, so that they could continuously use and consolidate grammar, to deepen the mastery of grammar rules and improve grammar skills.

Chen (2021) revealed that group learning can improve students' academic performance in different educational settings. Chen's study showed that students who participated in group learning achieved higher scores on tests than those taught in traditional ways. Additionally, students improved their understanding of complex academic content and problem-solving skills.

Chen also pointed out that group learning could help students develop a deeper understanding of learning materials and solve problems through discussion and cooperation, which led to improved academic performance.

Some researchers also studied how group learning helped improve students' interaction and language skills. Alfares (2017) discussed the importance of peer feedback in group learning; Gomleksi et al. (2007) found that group learning enhanced students' interest in English learning; Liao et al. (2005) proved that group learning improved students' English grammar skills and motivation; Chen (2021) showed that group learning helped students achieve better grades in comprehension and problem solving. These studies both highlighted the important role of group learning in improving student learning outcomes.

### **Challenges of Group Learning**

Group learning provides many benefits for student's communication, attitude, motivation, and knowledge acquisition. However, some studies have identified major challenges in group learning. They include student distraction, uneven task distribution, complexity of classroom management, and students' anxiety.

Celik et al. (2013) revealed a phenomenon in group learning that students are easily distracted during participation. They may turn their attention to unimportant topics such as weather changes and physical activity. These topics may be popular during recess or small talk for students. But they would distract students' concentration during group learning. Therefore, when teachers organized group activities, they needed to pay special attention to guiding students to keep their attention on the learning content. It would help students concentrate on the assigned activity and participate in group discussions.

Chen and Insley (2014) found that digital devices often distracted students during group learning. Digital distractions included students using these electronic devices to browse social media, play games, and discuss content related to classroom multimedia. These distractions impacted students from being fully engaged in assigned tasks.

Beiroviki and Senad (2017) showed that in the group learning process, the uneven distribution of responsibility tasks was a problem. Normally, some students took on too many tasks, and some students' participation was low. This imbalance would affect students' learning experience and prevented teachers from correctly evaluating their contributions. It may also cause conflicts among students, thus affecting the learning effect of the whole group. To improve this situation, measures need to be taken to ensure that every student could play a full part in group study.

AbuSeileek (2012) also confirmed that shy or introverted students may feel embarrassed if they fail to complete their tasks and do nothing when required to fulfill their duties. Therefore, specific roles should be assigned to each student. This may ensure that each student would contribute to the group's task and prevent some students from monopolizing the discussion or taking on too many tasks. Through careful role allocation, all group members may be provided

with equal and fair participation opportunities, which would stimulate students' creativity and interests, and encourages them to share unique insights and ideas.

Thornton (1999) studied the complete transfer of control by teachers to students led to the complexity of classroom management and suggested that the weakening of teachers' authority may negatively affect the learning environment. The complete transfer of teachers' authority to students may lead to disciplinary problems for students and make it difficult to follow classroom rules, which may affect the classroom learning atmosphere. In addition, if teachers lacked clear guidance and support, students may feel confused about the requirements of learning tasks.

Van Leeuwen and Janssen (2019) also explored complex classroom management in group learning. Their study found that teachers needed to balance classroom order and student autonomy. Specifically, teachers need to find the balance between total control and total withdrawal so that students can collaborate effectively. In addition, teachers' control was complementary to students' control. This means teachers needed to be sensitive and adaptable to students' responses and changes in the learning environment when adjusting their role and control level. The study emphasized that teachers needed to sensitively perceive and respond to students' needs while monitoring students' behaviors. This complex classroom management involved the implementation of teaching strategies and careful observation and timely adjustment of students' behavior.

Kadir and Salija (2018) explored the impact of competitive environments on students' anxiety levels in EFL group learning. They pointed out that this environment has a dual nature. On the one hand, group learning could motivate some students to have the motivation to improve themselves. However, students with low self-confidence or low language proficiency may develop anxiety. They would feel embarrassed and less confident to express themselves, which

may affect their academic performance and engagement in group learning. Therefore, when designing and guiding group activities, teachers should pay special attention to creating a collaborative learning environment to make sure that each student feels safe and relaxed in group learning. This kind of resolution would help reduce anxiety and improve learning effect.

Kalsoom, Soomro & Pathan (2020) explored the relationship between foreign language anxiety and students' willingness to communicate in EFL classes. They highlighted the dynamic relationship between language ability, anxiety, and motivation, and how these factors worked together to influence communication in an English context. The researchers pointed out that a hostile and competitive classroom environment increased students' anxiety, which in turn reduced their willingness to engage in communication. This would have a profound impact on students who lacked confidence. Research suggested that teachers needed to provide supportive and inclusive group learning environments to reduce anxiety.

## **Summary**

This chapter explored teacher-led group activities, emotional regulation, benefits, and some challenges of group learning in EFL classes. It explained the critical role of the teacher-led and student-centered in facilitating group learning and making a better learning environment. Chen and Long (2024) and Pica (1994) emphasized the importance of balancing teacher-led with student-centered in EFL group learning.

In terms of the benefits of group learning, Alfares (2017), Gomleksi et al. (2007), and Liao et al. (2005) explained that group learning could improve students' communication, attitude, motivation, and language ability. This approach improved students' language skills and confidence.

The chapter also discussed some challenges of group learning. Students' distraction, uneven task distribution, and the complexity of classroom management are the main problems in group learning. Celik et al. (2013) and Chen et al. (2014) showed that students were easily distracted by free talk and digital devices while doing group work. Beiroviki and Senad (2017) and AbuSeileek (2012) both confirmed that uneven task distribution also would make students hard to engage in group learning. Thornton (1999) and Van Leeuwen and Janssen (2019) showed that the complexity of classroom management made it difficult for teachers to manage group learning. These issues highlighted the importance of teacher-led and teacher supervision. In addition, Kadir and Salija (2018) and Kalsoom, Soomro, & Pathan (2020) explored the effect of competition in group learning on student anxiety. While competition can motivate students, anxiety can be heightened for learners who lack confidence. Hanjani and Li (2017) also noted that middle school students who were unfamiliar with group learning tended to feel less motivated.

### **Chapter III Conclusions and Recommendations**

This chapter explains the impact of group learning in China middle school EFL classes and recommends group learning strategies for middle school EFL classes in China.

According to the latest data from the Chinese Ministry of Education, the number of middle school students reached approximately 50.18 million in 2022 (Ministry of Education, 2023). They usually start to take English classes in the third grade and learn words and expressions, reading, and basic grammar rules. Systematic study starts in the seventh grade of middle school. Students take classes to develop “comprehensive language skills and cross-cultural communication skills” (Lan, 2024, p. 110). Specifically, they develop skills in listening, speaking, reading, and writing and enhance their practical language abilities.

Group learning is commonly used in English teaching. It can enhance students' communication skills and improve language proficiency through teacher's help and students' collaboration. In group learning, students can receive immediate feedback from their peers and solve problems collectively. This cooperative process improves their motivation, self-confidence, understanding of English and active participation. Consequently, group learning is typically used in middle school English teaching to develop students' language proficiency and group learning spirit.

In middle school EFL classes, group learning has proven to be an effective way to improve students' English language proficiency. For example, Tan (2015) provided compelling evidence that group learning was remarkably effective in middle school English teaching. This Study showed that group learning could increase students' interest in English and improve their academic performance.



This chapter emphasizes that balance teacher-led and student-centered, optimize cooperative settings, and emotional support are critical for students to improve group learning outcomes. Balancing teacher-led and student-centered ensures that students have an active participation by defining learning goals, making the process more organized and productive. Furthermore, an optimized cooperative setting can increase students' interests and their understanding. In addition, if teachers provide more emotional support during group learning. Students may reduce anxiety and increase their motivation and engagement. Students in this kind of supportive setting may be more motivated and willing to engage in their learning. Therefore, effective group learning strategies help improve students' EFL learning.

### **Recommendations**

This chapter proposes strategies to balance teacher-led and student-centered, optimize the group learning setting, and alleviate student anxiety.

Firstly, balance teacher-led and student-centered learning. On the one hand, teacher-led learning plays a vital role in monitoring student learning. Teachers should intervene in students' communication as needed to keep it consistent with teaching goals and keep students focused on assigned tasks. Teachers also need to prevent situations in which only a few group members take on most of the work while the others take less work during group learning. In addition, teachers need to monitor students' group learning process and ensure the effectiveness of group learning. On the other hand, group learning should also focus on student-centered learning. When students have more freedom to discuss the task of group learning, they may have more interest in expressing their experience and ideas. Peer help may also improve their understanding of the assigned task. Therefore, it is necessary to combine the teacher-led with student-centered group learning activities. For example, after defining roles and responsibilities, teachers should give

students enough freedom to express themselves openly, allowing them to show their experience and talents in group learning, monitoring their activities from time to time. This balance can increase students' interests and improve their skills in listening, speaking, interaction, and collaboration.

Secondly, optimize the group learning setting. Teachers can provide clear feedback, such as praise, evaluation, prompt, and question, so that students can understand the importance of their role and correct their behaviors in group learning. Teachers can also establish specific evaluation criteria to assess students' participation, creative thinking, problem-solving abilities, communication skills, and provide timely and positive feedback to promote their performance. In addition, teachers can set up a competition mechanism to stimulate students' competitiveness and motivation by giving some awards. Finally, implement a role play strategy in group activities. Teachers can assign roles such as leader, recorder, and reporter, and rotate them regularly. This method allows each student to experience separate roles and improve their learning skills, team spirit, and sense of responsibility.

Thirdly, teachers can provide emotional support to alleviate anxiety for students. On the one hand, teachers can periodically provide emotional feedback to students, including encouragement, care, support, and patience. By paying attention to students' emotions, teachers can give emotional feedback according to the environment of EFL group learning. This kind of additional emotional feedback can help students reduce anxiety and build confidence. On the other hand, peer support encourages students to interact and learn in a relaxed and comfortable setting. It can reduce the anxiety for students who have a low language proficiency or a low confidence. Such approaches can foster mutual inspiration and develop their collaboration.

Finally, teachers can apply strategies comprehensively for middle school students. In middle school EFL teaching, a single strategy is not sufficient to deal with students' diverse learning and psychological challenges during their growth. Middle school students are in the critical period of rapid growth in physiology and psychology, and their overall learning experience can be complex and changeable. Therefore, it is important to combine the teaching strategies of balancing teacher-led and student-centered, optimizing the group learning environment, and relieving students' anxiety. Through balancing the teacher-led and student-centered, teacher can increase students' learning motivation. By optimizing the learning environment, teachers can promote students' interaction and collaboration. By alleviating student anxiety, students can have an active participation. This comprehensive strategy can sort out students current learning issues and promote the overall development of middle school students.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter examined strategies to enhance group learning in middle school EFL teaching. It begins by highlighting the need to balance teacher-led with student-centered. Then it discussed methods to optimize the group learning environment, including providing clear feedback and implementing role-plays. In addition, it emphasized the essential role of emotional support from teachers, timely responses to students are important for fostering an effective learning environment. In a word, this chapter hoped these strategies can help middle school teachers consider using effective group learning methods to improve middle school EFL group learning and help students develop their language and communication skills through group learning.

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