

Chinese EFL Learners' Verbal Behaviors and Perceptions of In-Class Group Discussions in an English-Medium University

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Abstract: This study explored verbal interactions and perceptions of undergraduate students in cooperative learning groups within English as a medium of instruction (EMI) classrooms. Fifteen first-year students, organized into gender-mixed groups, were observed and interviewed. Classroom observations highlighted common verbal behaviors such as explanation, proposition, and agreement expression. Groups were categorized as proactive, active, or passive based on participation levels in knowledge co-construction. Interviews revealed positive student impressions, citing benefits in academic achievement, social skills, and self-confidence. However, the study noted diverse responses to the teacher's intervention and language shift: while stimulating for some, it reduced confidence in others. Despite this, students generally enjoyed collaborative learning, emphasizing its positive impact on their overall development. The findings offer insights for language teachers, suggesting ways to facilitate student-centered classrooms, bridging the gap between EMI instruction and students' confidence levels.

1. Introduction

With the shift of language teaching pedagogies from teacher-centered to student-centered, students' participation in class has been paid increasing attention by researchers in recent years. Holding in-class small group activities is widely considered as a teaching strategy that leads to increased student engagement and comprehensive learning in class (Cohen, 1994). In fact, various studies reported by the previous articles have confirmed that cooperative learning stimulates students into active learning and students perform better academically than they would be if they worked individually.[1] However, empirical studies on students' perceptions, especially English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) learners' perceptions, of their cooperative learning experiences are limited. Of few studies that have been made in the EFL context to investigate students' performance and perceptions of in-class group discussions, none of them were conducted in English-medium universities in mainland China, where the national educational policy has been recently attached great importance to collaborative learning, alongside the internationalization and globalization in higher education.[2-3] Therefore, the present study was conducted with the purpose of filling this research gap by examining Chinese EFL learners' verbal behaviors during small group discussions and their attitudes towards in-class group discussions in an English-medium university. In addition, through observing oral communications during the in-class small group activities, how individuals participated in knowledge co-construction were analyzed. The study took place at an English-medium university in mainland China. Participants were 15 freshmen majoring in English Language and Literature Studies, and all of them attended a one-on-one semi-structured interview about their perceptions of in-class small group discussions.[4]

1.1 Research Questions

Accordingly, the research questions (RQs) are formulated as follows:

RQ1. What are the common verbal behaviors performed by students during the in-class group discussion?

RQ2. How do the students in small groups co-construct knowledge during the in-class collaborative activities?

RQ3. What are the students' perceptions of in-class group discussions?

RQ4. How does English as the medium of instruction (EMI) affect students' perceptions and knowledge co-constructions of in-class group discussions?

1.2 Significance of the Study

The present study may provide an insight into undergraduate students' behaviors and perceptions when taking part in small group discussions in class and is significant in two different aspects. Firstly, the study may shed light on the effective use of cooperative learning in university classes, especially in the context of Chinese EMI classes with the EFL learners at upper-intermediate to advanced English proficiency levels.[5] Secondly, by figuring out the different verbal behaviors and perceptions of different students, instructors may know how in-class group discussions could be organized to maximize the learning outcomes in the classroom.

2. Literature Review

Numerous studies have attempted to investigate the effectiveness of small-group collaborative learning, how knowledge is co-constructed during collaborative learning, and students' perceptions of small group discussions. Swing and Peterson(1982) pointed out that small group collaborative learning creates an opportunity for providing and receiving higher order explanations and thus is particularly effective for lower academic level students.[6] Second language learners also actively engage in small group activities by using a high percentage of efforts to express their opinions, as Toth et al. (2013) demonstrated.[7] Students who actively engage in negotiating and discussing activities tend to leave a great conceptual and lexical imprint and thus make progress in L2 learning (Toth et al., 2013).[8] However, most of the studies were conducted in learners' first language or second language environment, failing to address foreign language teaching context in China. In addition to the research on collaborative learning in the classroom, this section also precisely focuses on the analysis of group discussions among Chinese undergraduates in the EMI environment.

Collaborative Learning. Johnson and Johnson (1999) defined cooperative learning as students working "together to accomplish shared learning goals" (p. 1).[9] Students are expected to share their ideas, help each other and make contributions as they work on the same task. Gillies (2006) points out that the foundation of cooperative learning depends on whether groups are well structured; otherwise, the effect of collaborative learning may not be suitable as expected. In recent years, researchers have investigated various aspects of group structural elements to accomplish a better learning outcome, including group size and seating arrangements.[10] For instance, some studies suggest that the best group size is only four or five pupils (Howe et al. as cited in Baines et al., 2003; Lou et al., 1996).[11] Knight and Mercer (2017) stress that students co-construct the specific knowledge through their collaborative talk. Mercer (1996) argues that 'Talk is increasingly regarded as more than a way of communicating thoughts: it is a social style of thinking, a tool for the collaborative development of knowledge by instructors and learners,' (as cited in Gillies, 2006).[12] In this light, Janssen et al. (2009) further elaborate that collaborative learning aims to improve students' subject knowledge while also allowing them to build new knowledge through interpersonal interaction.

Verbal interaction. According to Syarifudin (2019), "verbal interaction is an activity connecting one person to another through the use of language." Sangin et al. (2008) state that verbal interaction provides more complex dialogue and promotes further understanding among speakers.[13] When applied to the classroom context, verbal interaction among students directs them to understand each other's thoughts and leads to a greater understanding of the tasks (Syarifudin, 2019). Noreen (1985) argues that students' helping behaviors in small group discussion is a fundamental process, which can be categorized as asking for help, giving help, and receiving support. Ashman and Gillies (1997) further modify the verbal interaction modes and divide the students' verbal behaviors into eight categories, including unsolicited help, unsolicited terminal responses, unsolicited other responses, solicited explanations, solicited terminal, solicited no responses (ignoring), solicited other responses

and nonspecific verbal behaviors.[14]

3. Methodology

Prior relevant studies (e.g., Gillies, 2003) have confirmed that classroom observation is an effective research method for addressing learners' behavior in the classroom. As for identifying EFL learners' thoughts about participating in the group discussions, conducting one-on-one interviews is a valid approach (Alghamdy, 2019).[15] Therefore, to address RQ1 and RQ2, classroom observation was used to collect data about students' verbal interactions during group discussions. For RQ3 and RQ4, a one-on-one semi-structured interview was designed. The current investigation employed the mixed methodology, comprising classroom observation and interviews, which was qualitative research overall. Since the study aimed to figure out Chinese undergraduate students' verbal interactions and perceptions of small group discussions in an English-medium context. It was conducted at an EMI university from mainland China.

The research was undertaken with 15 year-one undergraduate students who majored in English Language and Literature Studies, aged around 20. Their English language proficiency was at the upper-intermediate to advanced level. The instructor divided the discussion groups at the beginning of the semester, with four or five members in each group. Since most of the freshmen were lack of EMI class experience, assistant instructors provided help during the group discussion time to make sure they could adapt to the EMI classroom atmosphere and understand the content better.

One-on-one semi-structured interview was another method. The interviews were conducted after the classroom observation, which aimed to examine participants' perceptions of the small-group collaborative activity. An interview protocol was devised to direct the interview process. Since the interview was semi-structured, some follow-up questions were asked spontaneously according to the interviewee's answers. Each interview was audio-taped and thoroughly transcribed into a written form by the researcher. The student interviews were undertaken in Chinese, their first language, allowing them to express their opinions clearly and intensively.

The audio recordings of the one-on-one student interviews were firstly transcribed into written text using the application Xun Fei Technology. After transcribing, the tape was listened again to proofread the results, and errors were corrected at this stage. The interview data was introduced and analyzed inductively: the recordings were transcribed and coded to identify the meaningful units. The highlighted meaningful language chunks were then categorized into various themes that emerged from the data. The answers provided by the students were firstly identified into meaningful parts, which were then coded and grouped into keywords and phrases. Next, the meaningful language units were identified and grouped into several themes.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 RQ1: Common verbal behaviors students perform during in-class group discussion

The three groups (Group A, Group B, and Group C) of students were selected from the major required course in freshmen year: Introduction to the Study of Language. According to the course schedule, the group discussion activity was held in the second half of the two-hour class. The instructor would set questions based on the previous hour's lecture content and print them on worksheets to discuss and write down the answers to the questions. Group A was the most active during group discussion, and members discussed in English most of the time. Group B was the only group whose course instructor also participated in the discussion. Students in Group C were not that active, and they used Chinese to discuss most of the time.

For Group A, the most common behaviors are explanation and agreement (See Table 1 for the verbal interactions employed). Except for one student (Tom), the rest were actively engaged during the in-class group discussion. Group B was the only group in the class in which the lecturer participated directly in the group discussion as one of the group members. Therefore, the verbal behavior of this group was different from that of Group A. In Group B, the most common behaviors

were agreement and explanation. The most common language behaviors in Group C were explanation and proposition. This group was not very interactive compared to the students in Group A, and they used Chinese to have their discussion most of the time.

Table 1. Verbal interactions employed by Groups A, B, and C during the group discussion period.

	Verbal interactions (on task)						Verbal interactions (off task)		
	Proposition	Explanation	Disagreement	Agreement	Question	Total	Chatting	Nonparticipation	Total
Group A	8	15	3	9	5	40	0	8	8
Group B	6	7	0	12	2	27	0	5	5
Group C	8	11	2	4	3	28	0	6	6

4.2 RQ2: Knowledge co-construction in small group discussion

Knowledge co-construction pattern in Group A. Overall, students in Group A were talkative, and most of them were actively engaged in the small group discussion. The most common on-task verbal behaviors in the chosen period were the explanation, agreement, and proposition, which occurred 15, 9, and 7 times respectively. Among them, explanation behavior occurred the most (see Table 2). The group members, including David, Helen, Stella, and Lilian, were very expressive. As for their group member Tom, on the other hand, rarely participated in the discussion, spending nearly half of the selected time doing something unrelated to the group discussion (see Table 2). It is worth mentioning that the students in Group A discussed almost entirely in English. When asked about the purpose, three of them said that it was to better adapt to the EMI environment and to have a more immersive atmosphere for learning English.

Table 2. Verbal Interactions Employed by Group A During the Group Discussion Period

Time	Verbal interactions (on task)					Verbal interactions (off task)	
(every 15 seconds)	Proposition	Explanation	Disagreement	Agreement	Question	Chatting	Non-participation
1	S						T
2			L		D		T
3		L, D		H, T			
4	S						
5		H					
6	D	L		S			
7					S, H		
8		D, H					
9	S						T
10			D				T
11	D, L	S		S, H			T
12	H	D					T
13		L	D	S			T
14	S	D					T
15		H, D					
16		L		S, L, T			
17		H					
18		D			L		
19					L		
20		S					
Occurrence	8	15	3	9	5	0	8

Note: The letters in the table represent the first letter of the student's name. For example, S stands for Stella, H stands for Helen, D stands for David, T stands for Tom, and L stands for Lillian.

In group A, Stella and David made the most contribution, who participated more than half of the total time. Both of them participated 11 times in the selected period. They can be defined as proactive students. And during the discussion, they took the initiative to move the discussion

forward and contribute most of their ideas to the group. When interviewed, they also talked about their intense willingness to communicate during group discussions. Stella defines her role in the group as a reflector and presenter. She considered the group discussion to be an excellent opportunity to consolidate what she had learned and to get other people's opinions. Hence, she was willing to say what she thought for everyone to discuss and evaluate. Helen and Lilian, who were also actively engaged in the group discussion, also provided many contributions to the group. Lilian participated in 9 and Helen in 8 times of discussions. Most of the time, they would make supplementary explanations after listening to others' opinions, and sometimes they would also try to propose another question. When asked about her role in the group, Helen defines herself as a listener. "I'm not a very talkative person myself, but when I see that the group members are very active, I don't want to be left behind." Unlike the other active members of the group, Tom was quite reticent. He was the only negative student in the group. All off-task behaviors in this group came from him. He was involved only twice in the selected period, and both showed agreements. He did not think he was familiar with the others, and with his poor English ability, he was even more reluctant to speak up.

Knowledge co-construction pattern in Group B. The knowledge co-construction type was unique in Group B. As the only group in the class with a professor participating in the discussion, the members of Group B were not as enthusiastic about participating as the other groups. As shown in Table 3, the group members expressed agreement far more than the other verbal interactions. This was mainly because the teacher often explained students' questions, and then they showed agreement rather than questioning or gave further explanations after listening to the teacher's expressions.

Table 3. Verbal interactions employed by Group B during the group discussion period.

Time interval (Every 15 seconds)	Verbal interactions (on task)					Verbal interactions (off task)	
	Proposition	Explanation	Disagreement	Agreement	Question	Chatting	Non-participation
1*							
2*							
3				H, R, F, P			
4	F	L					P
5					F		
6	F						
7		H		L, R			
8				H, R			
9*							P
10*							P
11*							P
12*				F			P
13	R	F		H			
14		H					
15	R			H, R	H		
16							
17	L	L		H			
18							
19	H				P		
20		L					
Occurrence	6	7	0	12	2	0	5

Note: The letters in the table represent the first letter of the student's name. For example, H stands for Hannah, L stands for Leo, R stands for Ruan, F stands for Fiona, P stands for Penny; "*" Refers to teacher talk.

Except for Hannah, who participated 9 times in the selected period, none of the other group members had a particularly pronounced willingness to participate (see Table 3). Hannah mentioned in the interview that she always prepared for class because she was worried about not following the class content. Besides, she did not want to miss the opportunity to communicate with the professor and always tried her best to participate in group discussions actively. Therefore, she was the only

proactive student in Group B. In addition to Hannah being proactive, other students such as Ruan, Fiona, and Leo were relatively active. They participated 6, 6, and 5 times in the selected period respectively. Their reactions were mainly to agree and sometimes to add some different interpretations. As for the only student who negatively participated in Group B, Penny was only involved in two times of discussions during the selected period. She complained, “Since I could not understand what the teacher was saying and I didn’t understand the discussion, I would check it myself on my phone. When I encountered some questions, I would turn to my friend’s help rather than the teacher.” Although many students from other groups admired the fact that Group B had more opportunities to communicate with professors, for group B members themselves, however, did not mean that the whole group benefited. The teacher’s intervention was sometimes a distraction when the students’ own English proficiency level, knowledge base, and willingness to communicate were not strong enough.

Knowledge co-construction pattern in Group C. The most common language behaviors in group C were explanation and proposition, which occurred 11 and 8 times, respectively (see Table 4). This group was not very interactive compared to the students in group A, and they used Chinese to have their discussion most of the time. Emma and Lisa were proactive students who engaged with the most enthusiasm. They were involved 9 and 8 times, respectively, during the selected period. Lisa mentioned in the interview, “I think we are not that familiar with each other. So whenever we have a discussion, it is a bit awkward. I’m not the one who spends a lot, but I do take the initiative to drive the atmosphere to lighten the mood, like proposing the next question.” Wang and Amy were also involved, but they were not very motivated. Amy explained in the interview, “Because we don’t know each other very well, and I don’t know much about this content, I think we prefer waiting for the teaching assistant to explain, instead of solving the questions ourselves.” Han, another member of Group C, was the least involved in it. The 6 off-task behaviors that occurred in this group all came from him. Even when other group members were speaking, he was still on his phone sometimes. He participated in the discussion only twice and was the only passive participant. Even though Group C did not have the most active discussion atmosphere, his performance still seemed out of place.

Table 4. Verbal interactions employed by Group C during the group discussion period.

Time interval (Every 15 seconds)	Verbal interactions (on task)					Verbal interactions (off task)	
	Proposition	Explanation	Disagreement	Agreement	Question	Chatting	Non- participation
1*					L		
2*	A	E					
3					E		
4		A	L				
5	L	E					H
6							H
7		E,		W			H
8		A					H
9*	L						H
10*		A					H
11*		A			W		
12*	L						
13			E				
14	E	L		H			
15		E					
16	H	A					
17	L			W			
18							
19	L	E		W			
20	A						
Occurrence	8	11	2	4	3	0	6

Note: The letters in the table represent the first letter of the student's name. For example, L stands for Lisa, E stands for Emma, W stands for Wang, H stands for Han, and A stands for Amy.

4.3 RQ3: Students' perceptions of in-class group discussion

Academic Achievement. The interview questions included the following aspects: academic achievement, social skills, and challenges encountered in cooperative learning. While asking their perceptions of in-class small group discussion, most of the students responded with a favorable opinion regarding academic achievement, which can be further categorized into three sub-themes or codes (See Table 5). For instance, they thought group discussion was helpful for learning since they could receive other people's ideas. Besides, participating in classroom activities as key protagonists can provide them with a deeper understanding of knowledge. For students (Group A) discussing in English, the members who participated attentively in the discussions all felt that their English skills had improved to a more or lesser extent, especially in speaking. For example, some participants said they found themselves speaking more fluently and had less hesitation when trying to express their meanings in English. For students (Group C) discussing in Chinese, they felt that the native language was a more effective tool for communication. Discussing in their native language could solve their doubts about the lecture and understand each other's opinions.

Table 5. Perceptions of In-class Group Discussion in terms of Academic Achievement.

Theme	Code	Example quotes
Academic achievement	In-class group discussion activity is helpful for learning	"When we listen to the teacher's lecture, we are only receiving knowledge passively. But through group discussion, the acquisition of knowledge is active." (Helen – Group A)
		"The group discussion is an additional opportunity to consolidate the class content and develop a deeper understanding of the knowledge." (David – Group A)
	Discussing in English can enhance English language skill	"After our group discussions in English, I found that my speaking skills had improved. Now I have the confidence to talk with foreign teachers." (Stella – Group A)
		"I feel that the real-time conversations have improved my speaking a lot and I speak English more fluently and without hesitation (about word choice)." (Helen – Group A)
	Discussing in Chinese can have a better understanding of the content	"Chinese is, after all, the native language. Everyone can understand and communicate smoothly. It will be more helpful to understand the content and also understand more about what others are saying." (Emma – Group C)
		"It is rather easy and efficient to communicate in Chinese." (Lisa – Group C)

Social Skills. In addition to the academic aspect, social skills, self-confidence, and interpersonal relationships were also mentioned in the interview. Most of the interviewees shared that the classroom group discussions made them socially proficient as well. Some students also disclosed that small group learning could boost their self-confidence, such as talking to foreign teachers, peers and speaking in front of the public. For instance, Amy stated, "I can talk to my Spanish teacher during the high table dinner. I used to be introverted and always encountered problems when talking to foreigners." However, the group discussions did not give everyone's self-confidence a lift. For students who were already confident, such as David, found it hard to experience building more self-confidence from the group discussion. These different opinions can be categorized into four different codes (see Table 6). Students who have learned and experienced group discussions tend to perform more cooperatively and friendly, according to Gillies (2004). Based on the data obtained in this study, group cooperation activity has a positive effect on students' learning and social interaction. Besides, group discussion also bonds a stronger connection between group members. One student remarked, "I am delighted to have this chance to build a friendship with my teammates. In fact, I rarely interact with other students after class anymore, but I talk a lot with my group members." The experience was constant with the findings of Johnson and Johnson (2004), who proposed that learning in a cooperative environment is more likely to build friendly and optimistic relationships, and harmonious companionship. Moreover, fewer students are excluded compared to

traditional teacher-centered classroom settings (Johnson & Johnson, 2004).[16]

Table 6. Perceptions of In-class Group Discussion in terms of Social Skills.

Theme	Code	Example quotes
Social skills and students' relationships	Improvement of social skills	"We would have disagreements inevitably during the discussion. I may have felt awkward before, but now we use some humor to defuse the awkwardness, and I really think my communication skills have improved." (Helen – Group A)
		"During the discussion, different opinions collide together, and then compromise and balance each other, and finally come to a solution." (Wang – Group C)
	Development of self-confidence	"I'm more confident in my oral expressions because I have a better handle on the use of words." (Hannah – Group B)
	No significant effect on self-confidence building	"I'm already very outgoing and I love to interact with people. So I don't think this group discussion had much effect on my self-confidence." (David – Group A)
	Students are closer to each other	"I was a little socially phobic, but group discussion has enhanced my friendship with many of my new friends from college now." (Amy – Group C)

Barriers to Cooperative Learning. However, not all the participants showed their full appreciation of the group discussion, especially some students with lower levels of participation. Their challenges include the unfamiliarity with group members and their lack of experiences in the EMI environment and student-driven classrooms (see Table 7 for the classification of two codes). During the collaborative learning process, some problems had encountered. For example, Tom mentioned in the interview that being introverted made it difficult for him to speak up in the discussions. "Because I was not close enough to the other group members." In addition, since they were new to the college and had never been exposed to a student-oriented classroom, becoming the classroom protagonist was a challenge for them at this stage. Some people did not feel they were ready to speak up because they were shy or not confident in English, which became their barrier to collaborative learning.

Table 7. Perceptions of In-class Group Discussion in terms of Barriers to Cooperative Learning.

Theme	Code	Example quotes
Barriers to cooperative learning	Not familiar with other group members	"I think they already have a good relationship with each other and I don't know how to fit in with them, so I mostly listen to their opinions or figure things out on my own." (Tom – Group A)
	Cannot adapt to a student-centred/ EMI classroom	"I've never been exposed to similar group discussions before, I think I'm more used to solving problems on my own. So up to now I still haven't adapted to this classroom mode, and I still think and look up information by myself." (Penny – Group B)

4.4 RQ4: Influence of EMI on Students' Perceptions and Knowledge Co-constructions in Group Discussion

All participants in this study were freshmen, most of whom were experiencing the EMI classroom environment for the first time. Their previous learning experiences in English classes were traditional teaching patterns, where the teacher provided instruction in Chinese and dominated the class, and students passively learned knowledge. Their past educational experiences differed from the student-centered classroom environment they were now embracing for their major required course. Evans and Morrison (2012) studied the language problems that non-native English speakers encountered after entering English medium universities. One of the most noticeable challenges was "following a discussion". Similarly, Berman and Cheng (2001) also indicated that the most difficult

problems for non-native English-speaking undergraduates occurred in oral presentations, participating in class discussions, and asking questions in class.[17-18]

This study also found that students' English proficiency and English as a medium of instruction may be a barrier to their cooperative learning communications (see Table 8). For instance, Penny shared in the interview that her lack of language skills made it difficult for her to speak up during the discussion and understand the professor's point of view. She became even more pessimistic about her role in the group. Already unconfident of herself, she gradually became more reticent and sometimes even wandered off. However, this did not apply to everyone. Sometimes students' language proficiency level did not limit their willingness to communicate. David, for example, was the case. As one of the most active students in the group, his English score in the college entrance exam was relatively low. Nevertheless, he felt he needed to adapt actively to the new environment and make progress. Therefore, he usually worked on pre-study before class and presented all his ideas during discussions, and contributed to the knowledge co-construction activity.

Table 8. Influence of EMI on students' perceptions and knowledge co-constructions in group discussion.

Theme	Code	Example quotes
EMI influences the willingness to participate	More negative attitude toward group discussions in EMI environment	"Because I could not understand the class content and the discussion, I was even less willing to express myself." (Penny – Group B)
	More positive attitude toward group discussions in EMI environment	"I was not so active before, but after I came to UIC, I think group discussion is another opportunity to communicate with teachers. Plus, compare with the lecture, the discussion is more relaxing." (Hannah – Group B)
EMI has no influence on willingness to participate	Still actively participating in group discussion in EMI environment	"I would say I've always been an outgoing and expressive person. Even if my English is not good, it doesn't affect my motivation to share my opinions." (David – Group A)

5. Conclusion

It was also observed in the classroom that the co-construction of knowledge and the modes of cooperation were diverse among the different groups. Most of the students in Group A preferred to communicate in English in order to integrate into the EMI environment and to practice their speaking skills. They enthusiastically took part in the group discussions and contributed a lot to the group. Group B, due to the direct intervention of the teacher, indicated that showing agreement was frequent. The interview data revealed that most of the students seemed shy and unwilling to participate, except for one student who did not want to miss the opportunity to communicate more with the teacher. Group C, on the other hand, preferred to communicate in Chinese, since they were more fluent in native language communication. Their discussions were not very active and sometimes all of them were silent because, as they said in the interview, they had not built a close relationship with their group members yet.

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