ABSTRACT

This qualitative study observed group processes in the foreign language classroom. The four objectives were to describe group processes, identify pedagogical processes and impeding factors in foreign language team assignments and to characterize student experience of groups and learning environments in EFL classrooms at Silpakorn University. The researchers engaged students in group tasks and then assembled written evaluations by the sample group of Silpakorn university students revealing the meaning that they found in their EFL group work. This study is limited to the perceptions and meaning that students find in groups, and not so much in measuring either student satisfaction or their level of proficiency.

The sample consisted of essays of 517 bachelor degree students in English classes at three different faculties of Silpakorn University. The data was analyzed for typology, taxonomies, grounded theory, analytical induction, matrixes for causation of group processes and tasks, hermeneutical analysis and discourse analysis. However, computerized discourse analysis (vocabulary frequency and readability levels) proved less helpful for the current study despite its potential for quantifying language and proficiency levels.

The study found that cohesive, cooperative groups in the foreign language classroom are very meaningful particularly in the integration of language skills acquisition, interpersonal skills and professional skills. The group processes observed in this study followed Tuckman's five categories of forming, storming, norming, performing and adjourning with L1 (Thai) characteristics and cultural considerations influencing group life at each step. For most students, this was their first positive experience of teamwork, because university classrooms tend to bundle students for games and activities, rather than create effective task-based groups. Leadership of groups proved to have an evolving and lateral hierarchy that stood in contrast with previous perceptions of Thai cultural ideas of leadership being authoritarian and reciprocal. Recommendations were given for assigning group tasks to provide scaffolding (particularly in helping groups to identify and divide up important functions or roles for the success of the group) and for controlling group assignment design. The complicated issue of criteria for marking group work and individual contributions is modeled. Significantly, conflict avoidance behavior hindered group cohesion and completion of tasks, so students reported greater individual benefits when their group overcame conflict in the process. Finally, the study identified 9 factors that could be useful for future studies to measure group cohesion and to correlate this with language proficiency development.

Keywords: groups, group processes, English as a foreign language, cooperative learning, group cohesion.