

# Groupwork practices outside the language classroom and their evaluation

## *Trabajo en equipo fuera del aula y su evaluación*

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### Abstract

Groupwork seems to be one of the most appropriate techniques to adapt to all the changes that have taken place in the language curriculum since it offers a number of benefits for learners as well as for teachers. Nonetheless, teachers encounter many obstacles when they attempt to assess this process when it occurs outside the class. This paper explores language teachers' opinions regarding the use of groupwork outside the classroom in Mexican universities. The study also inquires on the assessment techniques used by the teachers and the complexity of this process. Seven teachers at the English Language Teaching BA programs in different Mexican state universities were interviewed. The research design was qualitative, based on a semi-structured interview protocol. According to the teachers' discourse, it can be observed that teachers are not coherent on groupwork results and prefer to evaluate the students individually as a consequence of free riders in the groups. Besides, there is a lack of criteria for assessing the performance.

**Key words:** group work – evaluation – collaboration – lifelong learning.

### Resumen

El trabajo en equipo parece ser una de las técnicas más adecuadas para adaptarse a todos los cambios que se han producido en el currículo de idiomas ya que encierra varios beneficios tanto para los aprendientes como para los profesores. Sin embargo, los docentes encuentran muchos obstáculos cuando intentan evaluar este proceso cuando ocurre fuera del aula. Este artículo explora las opiniones de los profesores de idiomas sobre el uso del trabajo en equipo fuera del aula en las universidades mexicanas. El estudio también indaga sobre las técnicas de evaluación utilizadas por los docentes y la complejidad de este proceso. Se entrevistó a siete docentes de las licenciaturas en Enseñanza del Idioma Inglés de diferentes universi-

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dades estatales mexicanas. El diseño de investigación fue cualitativo basado en un protocolo de entrevista semiestructurada. Según el discurso de los docentes, se puede observar que éstos no son coherentes con los resultados del trabajo en grupo y al final prefieren evaluar a los estudiantes individualmente como consecuencia de los estudiantes que prefieren trabajar de manera independiente en los grupos. Además, faltan criterios para evaluar el desempeño.

**Palabras clave:** trabajo en equipo – evaluación – colaboración – aprendizaje para toda la vida.

## Introduction

In recent decades, language teaching and learning in Mexican Universities have evolved as we have witnessed a number of changes. First, in the early 1990's, communicative approaches were implemented over traditional repetitive individualistic methods in language classrooms. Then, the introduction of educational methods based on social constructivist approaches emphasized the importance of group construction of learning over the individual cognitive approach of acquiring knowledge. In addition to this, national education policy makers also suggested the inclusion of competences and the development of lifelong learning skills in the college curriculum, regarding collaborative work in groups as an important skill to develop in undergraduate learners. Within this context of changes, it is not surprising that language teachers would implement group work in and outside the classroom, as this strategy would add value to their professional activity and help learners to develop social, communicative and collaborative skills for a successful career.

## Collaboration in group work

Group processes in the classroom are thought to bring about several advantages for their members, such as the opportunity to participate in genuine involvement and engagement with others. Participants can work jointly towards the goals established, learn to discuss, express their viewpoints freely, improve their communication skills, enhance their ability to listen to others, and solve conflicts that may arise (Johnson and Johnson, 2013); that is, group members learn to collaborate with others. It is by working with others that individuals construct their identities, reflect upon their personal experiences and worldviews, share their concerns and values, and become aware of their responsibility within the group.

Some researchers claim that appropriate group work benefits not only students but also teachers, since collaboration provides both with a wide sense of engagement and participation in the tasks that could not be reached in a traditional class where the interaction is bidirectional and limited between the teacher and the students. Wallace (1998), for example, states that collaboration keeps students motivated if they focus on their goals, reduces time when performing engaging tasks, and enriches information by combining skills and reflections of the group members.

Rezaei (2018) conducted a research study to obtain professors and students' opinions about group work and found that among its benefits are that students could engage in learning together, foster scaffolding and peer instruction, develop collaboration, communication, social and leadership skills, use multiple perspectives in their activities, build a sense of responsibility and community, expand their creativity and imagination, carry out complex projects, promote exploratory thinking, improve self-confidence and critical thinking, develop time management skills, practice self-directed learning, and reduce competition among students and workload for teachers.

While collaborative work appears to offer a number of advantages, some authors have started to question its effectiveness as some reports of studies have revealed that students consider group work a waste of time, an extra workload for them, and think it is hard to measure and evaluate it in terms of the quality of the knowledge acquired (Ha, Jeroen, Theo, 2018). Wallace (1998) points out that possible difficulties within collaboration may be encountering differences among students, different positions concerning certain topics, variability in learners' schedules if the assignment is out of the class, difficulty in setting team working hours, and some emerging conflicts when defining students' different roles in the group. Rezaei (2018) also found that teachers find some negative elements emerge in group work activities, such as inequality of the work done, students not feeling sufficiently acquainted with the group, differences in personalities, interpersonal conflicts, jealousy, resistance and resentment attitudes, conflicts to finding time outside class, busy students unable to contribute, differences in motivations, work ethics, commitment level, poor communication, students not liking or enjoying it, distractions and time consumed, differences in the level of learners' knowledge and experience, unfair grading, technical problems, and taking more class time than expected for students presentations.

Despite the drawbacks mentioned, it is important that students work in groups because this process can enrich their ideas and experiences. Sometimes, learning also implies encountering frustration and confusion, among other differences and conflicts; therefore, group activity must be seen as an opportunity for students to learn to regulate, manage, solve and negotiate all the hardships they face. The learning gain is, without a doubt, an aspect that will remain for further experiences.

### **Groupwork as a lifelong learning skill**

As mentioned above, a vast amount of research has been conducted to explore the advantages of using group work in education. Considering its benefits, group work has been recently integrated in the curricula of many national and international educational models as an ideal strategy to develop lifelong learning competencies. Nowadays, more institutions pay deeper attention to the inclusion of essential competencies in their programs to help their students learn and adapt to rapid changes in the modern world. According to Hürsen (2011 cited in

Kaplan, 2017), lifelong learning skills include effective communication, active participation in team work, creativity, adaptability, collaboration, problem-solving, decision making, and empathy development among others in university students, as these skills are thought to lead them to succeed in their careers.

Cohen and Lotan (2014) have acknowledged group work as a superior technique which contributes greatly to problem solving, conceptual learning and academic literacy. Moreover, some advantages over other techniques include the opportunity to gain experience in collaborative work (Orr, 2010), an improvement over individual learning, or just the sum of the parts of students' work (Lillo, 2013). According to Cohen & Lotan (2014), group work also helps develop the skills necessary to achieve academic, intellectual and social goals. Its importance lies in its transferring from the classroom to work situations to be faced at professional practice, which is seen as one of the key skills for this century (Britton, Simper, Leger, Stephenson, 2017).

In general, group work has proven to be beneficial for students and has been consolidated as a technique in which more than two students "work together in the classroom to achieve a common task or learning objective" (Ruiz-Esparza, Medrano, Zepeda: 2016). Nonetheless, this technique has gone beyond the boundaries of the classroom to be applied to solving problems outside it. A great deal of research has focused on studying groups within the classroom, since there teachers can better appreciate each student's participation in the task, monitor, and intervene, as they have control of the group. According to Cohen & Lotan (2014: 1) it is best when students are put together "in a group small enough so that everyone can participate in a clearly assigned learning task". They also specify that this work must be conducted without any "direct or immediate supervision from the teacher" in order to foster organizational skills and independence. In this sense, teachers are to facilitate learning experiences through meaningful projects or tasks in group work (Lillo, 2013), not only in the classroom but also outside.

In order to explore the dynamics occurring outside the classroom in group work, teachers need to empower their students to take control of their dynamics and adapt to a different role and functions. For example, Davies (2009) recommends that for group work to be effective several actions from the teacher are necessary, such as some in setting up and dealing with groups, managing motivation (by providing incentives and penalties), cultivating interdependence, defining and setting group size, type of tasks and complexity, recognizing effort, and assessing procedures. Therefore, the teacher's role should be active, promoting discussion and reflection, interacting with students, answering questions, focusing on the groups achieving goals and building knowledge (Lillo, 2013), and intervening as a mediator and facilitator. However, this becomes more complex when teachers try to do all of this outside the classroom.

Several characteristics have been considered as essential in group work. Cohen & Lotan (2014) explain that delegating teacher's authority, generating in the students reliance on one another to complete tasks, and the communicative nature of the activity, are all key features

for the productivity of the group. Johnson & Johnson (1999) also mentioned some advantages, such as the promotion of social interaction.

On the other hand, some disadvantages generate insecurity in teachers to use group work as a technique when it comes to evaluating its effectiveness, such as the difference between what students are expected to do and what they actually do, which can generate hard to solve dilemmas. This gap is created mainly due to unexpected collaboration procedures among students (Lillo, 2013). It is difficult to establish clear criteria on what and how work should be carried out by the group and individually, and keeping a record of the performance of this work is also onerous. Therefore, scoring and assessing become difficult (Britton, Simper, Leger, Stephenson, 2017) and may be seen as unfair from the students' perspective. Rezaei (2018) sent a survey about group work perceptions to 177 participants, all of them university students. Regarding group work assessment, the results show that most students would prefer to be involved in their evaluation as it seems fairer for them. They also believed that group activities would be more productive if two grades were given: one for individual contributions within the group, and another for the final product. Finally, the survey also indicated that more than seventy percent of the students also believed that the grade given to group work should not be a larger part of the final grade of the course (Rezaei, 2018).

Hence, fairness is important when using group work as a pedagogical and assessment technique. Orr (2010) explains that the above mentioned gap between what the teachers ask and expect and what students do is a result of a lack of clarity in expectations from teachers, who do not expect quantity but quality in their students' performance. Students also expect quantification, and not qualitative remarks. Consequently, the students' scoring expectations are closely linked to the final product and their individual contributions to it rather than to the quality in its development and their performance in the process.

When we refer to the concept of evaluation, we need to explain that there are two definitions to consider. In general, evaluation means the result the students get on an exam or a test, which is what many Mexican teachers usually do according to the academic system we rely on in Mexican universities. A different concept is assessment, which refers to the qualitatively measured process that focuses on the students' progress rather than the result. In this document, assessment and evaluation will be used indistinctly, but we will take into account the emphatic meaning of assessment when using any of the concepts.

Assessing groupwork outside of the class involves a more complex effort from the teacher than just assigning a task or a project. When evaluating groupwork, teachers need to consider some important elements such as the recognition of individuals' effort and contributions, language competence and improvement, the task productivity or outcomes, collaboration, solidarity or participation (Davies, 2009). The complexity in groupwork outside the classroom comes when the teacher wants to monitor the groups' performance in the same way as when they are

in the classroom. The teacher tends to observe and follow the students' progress, and this may help control the possibly little or even no participation of some of the members of the groups. When speaking about activities outside the classroom, the teacher needs to search for strategies to intervene and trace the activities the groups are doing.

Most of the teachers expect quality work derived from the tasks assigned, as well as having low students mixed with high level ones in order to succeed. However, free-riding or the lack of or unequal level of participation or commitment of some students, is one of the teachers' main concerns when assessing their students' performance (Ha, Jeroen, Theo, 2018). There may be many contextual factors affecting the existence of free riders; for example, the grouping technique. Good (1981) adds that when students with poor ability in reading were grouped with students with the same level of ability, they did not succeed as well as when they were grouped with other students with a higher level of ability outside the regular classroom. On the other hand, Hansen (2006) points out that many studies have shown that when students form their own groups they tend to be more productive and participative.

From what has been discussed, some questions emerged and a qualitative study was designed, which will be described here. The project was designed to explore how language teachers assess when they assign group work outside the classroom, the aspects they consider important to evaluate, whether they use rubrics and how they use them, how they trace the groups' progress, and if they see in group work an opportunity for peer-evaluation, group evaluation, or self-evaluation. Another important element that was asked to the teacher who participated in the study was whether they perceived any benefit in assigning group work activities to their students and what kind of tasks they assigned to them.

## The study

This project is a section of a larger qualitative study which attempts to find out about university teachers' perceptions about group work practices outside the classroom and their evaluation. Given the nature of the study, it was conducted within a qualitative approach that would serve as an exploratory process to understand a social problem, just as Creswell (1994) defines it, considering "the point of view of the participants" (Denzin, Lincoln's, 1994).

This part of the study will present the results found in the discourse collected with a questionnaire created specifically to learn about the teachers' opinions in relation to the tasks assigned to their students and how they assessed them.

The instrument was designed in a discussion session by a group of Mexican researchers who were interested in the topic and were working in several teams to analyse the different data collected. What we present here is the analysis of the information obtained with a semi-structured interview with language teachers. Other researchers collected information by interviewing professors who have been teaching the following subjects in the English Language Teaching BA programs: Culture, Teaching, and Researching Methods.

## The participants

As explained before, the participants in the complete study were several professors teaching different subjects in the English Language Teaching BA programs in different Mexican universities in order to obtain the information desired, which will be shown in this article.

The participants in this part of the study were five English language Mexican teachers (T1, T2, T3, T4 and T5), aged 40-60 years old. Three of them had majored in English Language teaching, and the others had taken courses leading to an English major. They all work in the BA programs in English Language Teaching (ELT) in different state Universities in the North, Centre and South areas of Mexico. They have all have taught English for about five years to future English teachers. It is important to mention that other two general English language teachers (T6 and T7) giving classes in the language centres to university students from different programs were also considered in the study. Their profile was similar to that of those teaching in the ELT program. Even though the teachers differed in context, we tried to analyse the different perspectives and visions to contrast them in their discourses, which illustrate their perceptions.

## The Interviews

The researchers created a guide set of nine questions to be asked within a semi-structured oral interview. The questions were intended to provide some information related to what kinds of practices the language teachers were implementing in out-of-classroom group work and how they were evaluating these practices. According to Nunan (1992: 149) "interviews can be characterized in terms of their degree of formality, and most can be placed on a continuum from unstructured through semi-structured to structured interview. Topics and issues rather than questions determine the course of the interview in the most formal type".

The questions asked during the interview were related to the kinds of activities, tasks, or projects the teachers assigned to the students, the skills they expected to help develop with the activities assigned, the strategies they used to monitor and trace the group work outside the classroom, the instruments and criteria they considered to evaluate, if they evaluated each student individually or gave a note for the general performance of the group, the main challenges they faced and how they considered these could be solved, and what they considered to be the main advantages of group work (see Appendix A).

## Data Collection and Analysis

The researchers interviewed diverse teachers from different universities. The purpose of the research was explained to the teachers and they were asked for their collaboration in order to carry on the project. They agreed on the time for the interview session which consisted mostly of one hour. The professors interviewed signed an informed consent form stating their agreement to participate and be recorded in the project, as well as guaranteed the confidentiality of their data.

After the interviews had been recorded, they were shared with the other researchers and transcribed. Each teacher participant was labelled as T1 for Teacher 1, T2 for Teacher 2, T7 for Teacher 7, in order to protect their identity. In the Results and Discussion section of this article, their participation is indicated in parenthesis (T1, T2, and so on).

Once the data was collected, the study was given a data led approach to analyse, compare, contrast and discuss it to generate a pre-coding and coding activity as an iterative process until the categories emerged. In some way, the questions contributed greatly to “simplify the data while highlighting special features of certain data segments in order to link them in broader topics or concepts” (Dörnyei, 2007: 250). As suggested by Corbin and Strauss (2014), in order to make sense of the data, coding needs to go through a multi-level and systematic process, starting with an open and axial coding. This was conducted by the researchers within discussions in order to reveal similar themes and categorize the results based on the responses given by the language teachers in the BA programs and compared to the answers given by the general English language classes. A selective coding emerged, as can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Perceptions of Group Work outside the Class and its Evaluation

ASPECTS	English Language Teachers in the BA programs	Language Teachers in the language centres
1) Groupwork Assignments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Academic purposes: Book reports and literature reviews, research projects, presentations (T1, T2, T3, T4).</li> <li>Professional Development as Teachers: Class planning, teaching materials design, course planning, needs analysis to create a course (T1, T4, T5).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Cultural projects: museum visits, cooking traditional food, posters (T6, T7).</li> <li>Survival communication: dialogues (T6).</li> </ul>
2) Skills expected to be developed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Quality of the outcome (to complete the activity on time) (T1).</li> <li>Group work as a lifelong learning skill. This implies sharing knowledge (T2, T5), listening to others (T2, T4), responsibility (T3, T4, T5), L1 and L2 communication (T4, T5), respect different opinions (T4), collaboration (T3), tolerance (T5), commitment (T2) and effort (T2).</li> <li>Critical thinking skills such as analysis (T4), synthesis (T4), organisational skills (T4).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Quality of the outcome in terms of accuracy (vocabulary and grammar) (T6).</li> <li>Group work skills: such as support (T6, T7), participation and integration (T7).</li> </ul>

3) Strategies to trace the group work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Giving the learners the elements to be evaluated (T1).</li> <li>• Designating time in the class to monitor the advance and giving feedback (formal) (T2, T3, T4, T5).</li> <li>• Sending an e-mail message, by Whatsapp, Messenger, or any online app (informal) (T4, T5).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assigning time in the class for monitoring the advance and giving feedback (formal) (T6, T7).</li> <li>• Sending message, by Whatsapp, Messenger or by taking a photo with the evidence (informal) (T6, T7).</li> </ul>
4) Evaluation instruments and criteria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The product, which implies correct spelling (T1), a well written proposal (T1), accuracy in the grammar and vocabulary (T4), a correct citation (T4), coherence (T4), and well organised content (T3, T4).</li> <li>• The critical thinking skills such as; analysis (T4), problem solving skills (T4), creativity (T1, T4).</li> <li>• Group work skills such as: communicative skills (T4), responsibility (T3), organisation of the information (T4), participation (T3), collaboration (T4) and time management skills (T4).</li> <li>• Rubrics - adapted ones or designed by the teacher (T2, T3, T4, T5)</li> <li>• Guided observation (T4).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Completion of the project, presentation (T6).</li> <li>• Participation, commitment (effort and time spent) to the project (T6, T7).</li> </ul>
5) Definition of Rubric	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Instructions for group work (T5).</li> <li>• Criteria for evaluation (T1).</li> <li>• Instrument to measure with characteristics to evaluate (T2).</li> <li>• Elements to take into consideration in assessment. (T3).</li> <li>• It serves to give feedback to the learners in order to improve and change (T4).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A format to evaluate and give value to some criteria to consider in the evaluation. It must include contents and skill development (T6, T7).</li> </ul>
6) Group or individual grading in group work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individual note for each group member (T3).</li> <li>• Group note (T1).</li> <li>• Both (T2, T3, T4, T5).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individual note for each group member (T6).</li> <li>• Both (T7).</li> </ul>
7) Challenges and possible solutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Poor level of some students' participation (T1, T5). The students tend to use simple and rapid ways to work. They elide hard work (T3, T4).</li> <li>• Students do not use the L2 for communication in the groups (T1).</li> <li>• Time is not enough for the teacher to trace their advance (T2).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Poor level of some students' participation. The solution is to evaluate the activity individually (T6 T7).</li> </ul>

8) Level of Satisfaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not at all / Not much (T<sub>1</sub>) because it is class time consuming even when it is an activity outside of the class and the teacher would like to monitor them all the time (T<sub>2</sub>, T<sub>4</sub>), not all the students commit in the same level (T<sub>3</sub>), or become prepared for group work (T<sub>4</sub>).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No. The learners do not commit equally in the group work (T<sub>6</sub>),</li> <li>• Yes, "The <i>students learn and I think, this is the most important result from group work interaction</i>" (T<sub>7</sub>),</li> </ul>
9) Advantages of using group work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It is an opportunity for self-evaluation. (T<sub>5</sub>).</li> <li>• Group work outside the classroom helps to save time in the class (T<sub>1</sub>).</li> <li>• The feedback has effect in the members of the teams (T<sub>2</sub>, T<sub>5</sub>) as they may gain some self-confidence at the same time they learn and collaborate with others (T<sub>3</sub>).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It may motivate some learners (T<sub>6</sub>).</li> <li>• Everybody gets satisfied with the objective achievement (T<sub>7</sub>).</li> </ul>

## Results and Discussion

### 1) Group work assignments

According to the data collected from the interviews, most of the activities assigned by the professors to students in the ELT BA programs include: a) tasks which can be part of a complete academic project such as book reports (T<sub>2</sub>), literature reviews (T<sub>2</sub>, T<sub>4</sub>, T<sub>5</sub>), research projects and presentations (T<sub>1</sub>, T<sub>2</sub>, T<sub>3</sub>, T<sub>4</sub>, T<sub>5</sub>), discussion of readings (T<sub>3</sub>); b) tasks related to their professional training and development such as the creation of teaching materials (T<sub>2</sub>, T<sub>3</sub>), class and course planning (T<sub>4</sub>, T<sub>5</sub>), and needs analysis to create a course (T<sub>4</sub>). On the other hand, the activities assigned by the language teachers giving classes in the university language centres focused on assigning communicative survival and cultural activities such as visits to museums, learning about food, cuisine, construction of a dialogue in a specific context (T<sub>5</sub>, T<sub>6</sub> and T<sub>1</sub>) and only one teacher in the BA programs vaguely mentioned cultural activities as important (T<sub>2</sub>).

While the teachers participating in the ELT BA programs are concerned about the constant academic use of English into the activities assigned, the teachers in the language centres tend to assign activities that can be more attractive regarding the language communicative purposes and the survival of English language speakers. Interestingly, in both contexts, the teachers tend to create either meaningful activities that could serve for students' professional and academic development (T<sub>3</sub>, T<sub>4</sub>, T<sub>5</sub>), or challenging cultural tasks (T<sub>6</sub>, T<sub>7</sub>), as Lillo (2013) suggested, to engage students during their completion. That is to say, the assignments given to the students who will be teachers and who are taking the ELT BA program are mainly related to academic writing in research, teaching activities and oral presentations, while the students in the language centres would be more attracted to everyday language use to survive in a real communicative situation in the target language. These results show that teachers make an important effort to

assign tasks where the English language could be used as a means to gain knowledge for the learners' individual and professional development.

## *2) Expected abilities evolved in the students/ within group work outside the class*

During the interviews, after having made a careful discourse analysis, it was noticeable that the words mostly repeated in the teachers' answers in this part of the study were related to the implications of group work as a lifelong learning skill. For example, the teachers claimed that they expected to develop their sharing knowledge (T2, T5), listening to others (T2, T4), being responsible (T3, T4, T5), communicating effectively in L1 and L2 (T4, T5), respecting different opinions (T4), collaborating (T3), tolerating (T5), committing to the group (T2). One of the teachers also included the importance of developing critical thinking skills such as analysis (T4), synthesis (T4), and organisational skills (T4). Nonetheless, there are some differences in the way the teachers in the ELT program interpret and promote these elements and the way in which English language teachers at the language centres do. Teachers in the former group tend to give more meaning to group work activities in the sense that they expect their students to develop more professional and critical skills for their future, while the latter group of teachers consider teamwork an opportunity to integrate the students so that they can share and scaffold each other in their learning.

All of the teachers coincide that teamwork is a lifelong skill that is necessary to develop for the students' lives and careers. Some skills desired to develop in groups are related to personal development, community interaction, facilitation and adaptability, formal interdependence, power sharing and boundary management (Tosey, Gregory, 1998, cited in Jarvis 2004: 147). To achieve this, it is necessary to include them as part of the teachers' class and tasks planning process. The participants also mentioned that it was also expected for the students to develop other skills, due to the nature of the assignment.

All the participant teachers also mentioned that putting knowledge into practice was expected from students while working in teams out of the class. It was highlighted that sometimes there is not enough time given to do this during the class, so going back to the task in order to complete it in teams may give them an opportunity to reflect on the content, discuss and negotiate with other students while completing the task or the project given.

The idea of having the students work in teams outside the classroom is also focused on doing quality work. For the first group of teachers in the BA programs, the quality of the outcomes or products is measured in content (T4) and time (T1), while the language teachers in the language centres at the universities emphasize that accuracy is mainly graded taking into consideration the proper use of vocabulary and grammar in their final products (T6, T7).

Group work, even with its disadvantages (Davies, 2009), could be an experience for the students to work productively with others as well as to improve their knowledge. Harris (1996: 158)

points out that “as we get older and need to learn more and more complex concepts and skills, our innate capacity to learn (and to learn how to learn) becomes developed and modified by experience.” It is through the sharing of knowledge that students are expected to experience different points of view, analysing them and contributing in order to achieve their assigned tasks.

### **3) Strategies to keep track of group work**

The participants revealed that several techniques were used to trace how the groups were working on a task or project given. One of the techniques mentioned by all the teachers was tutoring and guiding the groups’ work, which mostly occurs during class time (T2, T3, T4, T5, T6, T7). Nonetheless, there are other informal means by which they could trace their students’ group work by sending e-mail messages, using Whatsapp, Messenger, or any online app (T4, T5, T6, T7), before the final presentation of their products. Another way to monitor group work, according to the teachers’ answers, was to ask the groups to briefly present the advance of their projects at different times during the academic term before the final delivery of their products.

It is important to mention that all the teachers relied on the fact that there must be a scheduled time during the class to monitor the progress of the groups. The most important details can be done in class so the students will not get confused when working in their teams outside the classroom. Thus, the teachers make sure the instructions are clear for everyone, and the students must be guided as well (T1). Simultaneously, and in the final stage of the class if it is convenient, it would be useful to share with the students the teacher’s e-mail address (T5) to follow their work and in case the students have any questions or comments about the assignment.

All of the teachers interviewed claim that it is important for teachers to frequently ask the groups what, how, where, and how this work is going, in order to monitoring the progress of the projects as well as give the students proper feedback, which is greatly expected by the students. Ferdous & Karim (2019) found that learners expect constant supervision from the teachers in group work from the very beginning of their projects. They also suggest the teacher moderate possible collisions and help solve emerging problems among group members. Underhill (1992) states that a teacher’s job is to become more receptive about the activities as well as the personal processes that occur within the group. The students’ expectations need to meet those of the teachers’ in order to avoid excessive intervention from instructors and give the groups time to exert their freedom in their organisation and decision-making skills.

### **4) Instruments and criteria to evaluate group work out of the class**

According to the analysis of the teachers’ answers during the interviews when they were asked about the instruments used and the criteria taken into consideration in the process of evaluation, there are some differences. The BA teachers focused on the use of rubrics adapted or designed by them (T2, T3, T4, T5) and the design of a guided observation (T4). These instruments focus on assessing three main criteria: 1) *the product* presented with a clear and accurate use

of the English language, which implies correct spelling (T1), a well written proposal (T1), accuracy in grammar and vocabulary (T4), correct citation (T4), coherence (T4), and well organised content (T3, T4); 2) *critical thinking skills* such as how the groups manage their analysis (T4), problem solving skills (T4) and creativity (T1, T4); and 3) *group work / collaborative skills* such as communicative and social skills (T4), responsibility (T3), organisation of the information (T4), participation (T3), collaboration (T4) and time management skills (T4).

In short, since the students in the BA program are majoring in language teaching, a product with a correct spelling, grammar, accuracy, citation format, and coherence, is expected to be evaluated. It is clearly observed in the teachers' discourse that elements such as creativity, responsibility, participation, and collaboration are considered in the evaluation in order to make every member participate in the team, and as a result of a collaborative work to become more responsible as well as committed within their groups. However, these elements seem to be evaluated subjectively by the teacher, who gives a note according to what they consider to be "fair" for the students.

On the other hand, the language teachers at a language centre did not mention the instruments used in the evaluation but they did comment on some criteria taken into consideration during evaluation, focusing basically focus on two features: the product and its presentation (T6), and the students' performance in the groups, which includes the effort, time and commitment they spent to complete the task (T6, T7). It is observed that teachers do not take into account learners' self-evaluation of their performance in their groups or even a group evaluation, which may enrich the learners' formative process in many aspects.

### 5) *The definition of "rubric"*

A rubric serves to measure the performance level of learners (Brookhart, 2018). Many teachers tend to believe that rubrics refer to any scoring criteria and confuse rubrics with other evaluation tools such as checklists or other rating scales. However, a rubric generally has two elements: the criteria or aspect to be evaluated, and performance descriptors of different levels of quality which vary from low to high (Brookhart, 2018). Brookhart mentions two main types of rubrics: the analytical, which provides a detailed description of the criterion to evaluate, and the holistic, which gives an overall overview of the students' performance.

Apart from the definition given above, it is important to make an analysis of the answers given by the participants in this study when they were asked about their own definition of rubrics. The teachers' perceptions of the term "rubrics" vary. The language teachers in the language centre perceive the rubrics as a format or a way to evaluate and give value to the criteria for evaluation (T6, T7). Meanwhile, the language teachers in the BA program define rubrics far beyond a practical format. For example, they mentioned the utility (T2), the purpose (T4) and even some characteristics of the process of evaluation (T1 and T3). These teachers mentioned that these criteria need to be respected by both the teachers and the students (T3), which means

that a rubric goes through a process of negotiation for feedback, for a positive transformation in the students' performance and improvement (T4). One of the teachers indicated that a rubric is a group of instructions to be followed during group work, which once again, means a process of negotiation between the students and the teacher (T5).

In short, all the teachers believe that a rubric is an evaluation tool with some criteria to evaluate, but it is not clear if all of them understand how it works or how they can maximize its potential.

### ***6) Group or individual evaluation***

From the seven teachers interviewed, only one (T1) mentioned that the evaluation should be made of the whole group performance without considering individual differences, and another teacher (T6) suggested that group work must be assessed individually according to each member's performance since the effort is not equal in all the students. The remaining five teachers (T2, T3, T4, T5, T7) agreed that the note given in the evaluation must be analysed both as a group and emphasizing the individual effort and participation in the final product. All these teachers agreed that it would not be fair to give a total group evaluation without considering the individual assets. Teacher 4 recognised that group work enriches the individuals because they interact, share, and become aware of their learning processes.

According to the study by Rezaei (2018), students would feel more comfortable if they were given two grades, one as a group and another considering their individual contributions. The results in Rezaei's study coincide with the teachers' perceptions in this study. It seems that groups help individuals in their development, and both teachers and students understand that in the end, the benefit of working in groups is individual.

### ***7) Challenges in group work out of the class and solutions***

Four language teachers in the BA program (T2, T3, T4, T5) highlight that the problems lie in the students' lack of capacity to manage their own study processes in the groups. As mentioned above, teachers are certain that group work contributes importantly to the development of collaboration and problem-solving skills. However, they also believe that learners need much intervention and guidance from the teacher to succeed (T2 and T5). Some answers were "The students have terrible habits. They do not know how to manage their time or how to solve their difficulties" (T4), "they always give excuses and lie about what they are doing in the groups as they do not know how to collaborate" (T3), "the students need a lot of guidance and feedback from the teacher as the educational system in Mexico has led them to become entirely dependent. It is cultural" (T5), "students need more time from the class to organise their activities and for the teacher to intervene and monitor their work" (T2).

On the other hand, all the teachers (T1, T3, T4, T5, T6, T7) except one (T2) mentioned that a common problem is the lack of participation or the different level of commitment or commu-

nication of the learners in the groups. Davies (1999: 567) identified the problem of individuals who received the benefits of group work in exchange for little or no effort as “the free rider” problem. In order to avoid this, he proposes the members of the groups sign a contract to commit with the group and peer evaluation. Interestingly, the teachers in the BA program complained about the problem but did not suggest any remedial solution.

The teachers in the language centre (T6, T7) also stated that the main challenge is the lack of collaboration of some students as well as the different levels of proficiency in English. The solution for the first challenge was to give individual evaluation in the projects, so that the learners did their best to get a good grade. Concerning the different levels of language proficiency in the groups, the teachers proposed special activities for the more advanced students. However, we must remember that mixability in the groups is something that we as teachers will most of the times not be able to control: on the contrary, and according to Vygostskyan theories of learning, learners with different skills and levels will be able to provide scaffolding for each other to construct knowledge, which helps all the participants.

### ***8) Level of the teachers' satisfaction with group work outside the class***

In the interview, one of the teachers (T5) did not want to answer if she was satisfied with the results of using groupwork as a teaching technique. Only one teacher (T7) said that she was happy with the results as “The students learn, and I think this is the most important result of group work interaction”. All the remaining teachers (T1, T2, T3, T4 and T6) manifested that they were not satisfied with the results of this practice because of several causes.

The main reason why the teachers do not consider group work outcomes effective to make them feel satisfied as a result of an uneven effort of the learners doing the tasks as well as poor commitment of the learners (T2, T3, T4, T6). Once again, the main weakness in group work may be marked as the differences in commitment, effort, attitudes, discipline, workload, motivations, interests, knowledge and experiences.

Other reasons for the teachers not to feel satisfied are, first of all, related to conditions of time (T2, T4) and the belief that students need more guidance from the teachers. As T2 said, “I would like to take more time of the class to work on their progress. I would love to stay with them and monitor what they do all the time. I know it is time consuming and I would never end the content of my program”. T4 stated that developing collaborative skills takes time and it is not easy for a teacher, especially when the system does not foster group work practices in the curriculum or as a cultural matter: “It would be different if we, as teachers, worked as a team, the education at the university, many things could be possible” (T4).

The results in this section show that teachers in general do not feel satisfied when assessing groupwork mainly because of the lack of learners' collaborative skills and free-riding, so that individual assessment would be a solution to make group members become more interested in

collaboration. This could be dangerous since these practices could promote competence, rivalry and a sense of superiority instead of fostering a sense of community, inclusivity and integration.

### ***9) Advantages of group work out the classroom***

The teachers interviewed mentioned different advantages of in group activities, such as saving class time: “They do not use the class time for these activities” (T1) Another advantage of this activity is that projects are divided into different tasks and presentation stages, which means opportunities to gain some feedback from the teacher (T2, T5) and make improvements for the students; that is, their development is easily monitored. One of the teachers focused on the advantages of collaborating in the groups as the members gain confidence by working with other students (T3). One of the teachers mentioned that out-of-the-classroom group work can have the advantage of allowing the learners to reflect about their commitment in the group and self-evaluate (T5).

On the other hand, the language teachers at a language centre commented on the advantages in terms of motivation (T6) and also focused on the results. Most of the time, they are positive and they achieve their objectives (T7); consequently, the learners may feel satisfied

Group work activity needs to be carefully designed to optimize its didactic use; otherwise, it could become conflictive and give the participants a feeling of wasting time. It could increase the level of dissatisfaction as well of frustration concerning the teachers and the learners. Not only must the students commit to the activities but the teachers must also create meaningful tasks whose objectives are carefully chosen and clearly explained to the learners so they know what they need to achieve as well as what is expected from them in order to be able to address their effort, assess their development, and meet the criteria of evaluation.

## **Conclusions**

This study aimed to explore the opinions and perceptions that teachers have towards groupwork and its assessment. The teachers tend to assign activities to be completed in groups. However, they do not take the time to prepare students for the skills that they need in order to collaborate with others. Teachers consider three important aspects to be evaluated in the tasks: the quality of the outcomes, life-long-learning, and collaborative and critical thinking skills. The results in their responses indicate that they tend to be confused about how to evaluate these elements. They use guided observations and rubrics but they do not have a clear idea of what a rubric is. They reduce its importance to a set of instructions or characteristics to evaluate and do not consider it as a potential tool to get the most out of group work.

The most important concern for teachers is the free riding effect in the learners, which makes them extremely unsatisfied with group work dynamics. Nonetheless, ultimately, they have expressed that it is better to evaluate individually rather than as a group. There is a lack of

knowledge about how to assess group work, and they end up evaluating individual efforts to complete the assigned task. There is a lack of consistency in the way some teachers evaluate and the objective of the activity or the skills they want the students to develop.

Teachers must make an important effort to measure and consider the effectiveness of working in groups and bear in mind that not all the students' progress will be equal but learners might, undoubtedly, experience the benefits of collaborating with their peers. The gain will remain in their life's experience.

## APPENDIX A. QUESTIONS (IN THE INTERVIEW)

- 1) What kind of tasks do you assign to your students for out-of-classroom group work?
- 2) What skills do you attempt to develop by assigning out-of-classroom group work?
- 3) How do you trace groupwork progress?
- 4) Which instruments and criteria do you use to assess out-of-classroom group work?
- 5) How would you define a rubric?
- 6) Do you evaluate the group or individually?
- 7) What challenges do you find in out-of-the class groupwork? What solutions do you suggest?
- 8) Are you satisfied with the results in out-of-class groupwork?
- 9) What benefits do you find in out-of-the class groupwork?

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