Students' Perception of Group Assignments in Classroom Teaching

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ABSTRACT

Teamwork assessments enrich students' educational experience by assisting them to graduate with essential skills. This is vital as a recognised set of skills shortages exists among fresh graduates. Since group work provides a more supportive environment than individual work, group learning has become increasingly popular in educational settings. It encourages greater problem-solving skills, critical thinking, responsibility, reasoning, positive interdependence, and a deeper comprehension of the subject matter. However, members' attitudes, views, and willingness to work together affect how a group functions. This study examines their perceptions and opinions about group assignments to better understand the variables influencing their participation. Quantitative research methods were used, employing structured online and face-to-face interviews with students enrolled in EWC661, the English for Report Writing subject. The main results from the questionnaire analysis are: 1) though a few have differing experiences, 63% of the students view their group assignment experience positively; 2) 53% of the students expressed a preference for group work over other assessment methods despite the numerous challenges; and 3) the students develop several strategies to ensure fair contributions from all group members and to manage those who did not fully participate. This study suggests pedagogical enhancements that could enrich students' teamwork experiences during assessments.

Keywords: Teamwork assessment, group experience, group preference, strategies

INTRODUCTION

The teaching of higher institutions today is adopting collaborative learning methods, such as group projects, and these methods receive the most attention in terms of the positive effect they have on the involvement of students, especially in language learning. Members of group projects collaborate for common objectives, enabling them to brainstorm ideas, collaborate on different tasks, and solve problems together. This cooperative approach mimics situations in real life where one cannot complete some activities without the assistance of others. It also equips them with essential skills they need, which will help them in their academic endeavours and professional development in the future.

Group assignments in language learning serve many purposes beyond academic achievement. It allows students to practise and improve their language skills in real-world communicative situations, promoting a better relationship between theoretical ideas covered in the classroom and practical language use. As they move on, they can discuss and mingle with students from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds. This interaction helps them to understand different viewpoints and nuances in language and culture, improving their language skills. Furthermore, the development of crucial interpersonal skills such as communication, leadership, and conflict resolution, which are essential in both academic and professional settings, is facilitated by continuous interaction and negotiations within their groups.

Previous research emphasises the pros of collaborative exercises in promoting better student learning. According to research, the impact of collaborative student projects on students has been very consistent, and, therefore, the distinction can be made between the effects of group and individual work. Students work in a dynamic group setting that encourages them to tutor each other, besides seeking help from the lecturers, and thus they become better learners. They are also socialised to be able to function in the social world by recognising the rules of the rights and responsibilities inherent in solving problems with others in a group. Correspondingly, during

cooperative work to reach the same goals, students strengthen their understanding of the course material and also identify the various techniques used by their classmates, thus broadening their way of learning.

While it's true that group assignments have several advantages, they also have drawbacks. The matter of unequal labour division, different levels of commitment from team members, and disputes may crop up, eventually leading to an ineffective and partially engaged learning environment. Handling this problem needs assiduous planning, unambiguous guidelines, and proactive instructors' guidance to ensure all the students participate according to the expected standards and get the most out of the activity. This article intends to examine a variety of students' perspectives, opinions, and experiences regarding group assignments in university language study. Taking these factors into account and analysing the effects on student engagement, skill development, and overall learning results. Specifically, this article seeks to answer these questions: (1) How do students perceive their experience with group assignments, positively or negatively? (2) Do students prefer group or individual assignments? (3) Do students use strategies to accomplish group assignments fairly?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The recent literature on the application of group assignments in language learning has multitudinous benefits and challenges, thus highlighting its importance in the creation of a learning environment. Many studies emphasise that the group task is not only a channel for the acquisition of language but also a means of the development of indispensable interpersonal skills among students. Fostering intensive language learning through group assignments is indicated more precisely by the data of Johnson and Johnson (2009). They explain that the students, with their active participation, use their language negotiation and meaning skills to resolve linguistic ambiguities; hence, they will construct knowledge collectively. Through collaboration, these students are motivated to get deeper into the language activities; thus, they grow as more effective language users and do so through the completion of authentic communicative tasks.

Furthermore, research by Storch (2005) explains how the implementation of group assignments contributes to the social and cognitive development of language learners. According to Storch, the collective duties, such as the problem-solving activities and the project work, give students the chance to use language in a meaningful way and the possibility of engaging in peer interaction. Participants-related verbal communication issues create this very process, and through it, learners get responses to their interventions and negotiate the new words, so they co-construct the language knowledge, therefore enhancing their communicative competence. Storch stated in his report that group work not only improves language proficiency but also encourages learning environments where the students can research and practise the structures and strategies in a low-risk environment.

Recent studies highlight that peer collaboration fosters learner autonomy and self-regulated learning. They accept collaborative responsibility for the tasks and have a chance to become the leaders of their learning processes, set goals, and evaluate themselves. By doing these things, they increase their autonomy. They are more likely to use the feedback that is given to them, as well as being critical, reflective, and experimental with language (Mercer & Things, 2007; Littleton, 2007). Therefore, these self-regulatory learning strategies become a significant part of the language learning process for students in a group setting, especially for those new to language acquisition and proficiency development.

According to recent research, individuals do take into consideration challenges that may emerge in the process of carrying out group projects for language acquisition, even when there are benefits. For instance, Johnson, Johnson, and Smith (2014) mention unequal participation, language dominance, and interpersonal problems within groups. These issues can reduce the effectiveness of group learning, requiring strict control from the teachers. As cited by Johnson et al., the imperative strategies for overcoming these hindrances include clear guidelines on how the task is to be completed, clearly defined roles for each student, and standardised peer assessment. Fair involvement of students in group assignments will have students experiencing enjoyment in learning.

Thus, modern literature is flooded with the idea that group projects can be the thing that saves the world in terms of language learning. This is because of its ability to increase students' proficiency in the target language, the skill of teamwork, self-organisation, and time management skills. Even though the situation calls for utmost

efforts, positive instructors' strategies and learner-supporting services can turn the collaboration exercise on the whole into a majorly constructive adventure for diverse learners of the language, despite widely varying educational and other backgrounds.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, a group-based assignment for the subject EWC661, English for Report Writing, was used to enable students to learn from each other's knowledge and experience. The components involved in this group assignment were a survey study, an oral presentation, and a written report. Groups of three to four members were self-formed, although students were encouraged to mix backgrounds and experiences. At the end of the semester, each group member submitted an evaluation of his/her perception of their group member's contribution. Convenience sampling was used by selecting participants from two faculties who enrolled in the EWC661 subject. 60 undergraduate students were selected, evenly split between male and female students.

A quantitative research approach was employed for this research, and a structured online survey served as the primary data collection instrument. The survey questionnaire was designed to capture students' attitudes, preferences, and experiences related to group assignments in the context of the subject. It included closed-ended questions with Likert-scale responses to measure agreement levels, as well as some open-ended questions to gather qualitative insights into students' experiences and suggestions for improvement. The survey was pre-tested with a small sample of students to ensure the clarity and reliability of the instrument.

The survey responses were analysed quantitatively using Microsoft Excel to generate summary statistics before being descriptively described in frequencies and percentages to summarise the results. Additionally, qualitative responses to open-ended questions were analysed thematically to identify key themes and significant comments.

This questionnaire ranged widely on issues such as students' preferences about assignment types, peer support, working style preferences, strategies to secure fair contributions, applied communication tools, skills considered necessary within the frame of group assignments, and advantages/shortcomings of group assignments. Moreover, this survey also gathered additional input from participants regarding any specific problems faced and recommendations that could help to improve the assignment.

RESULTS

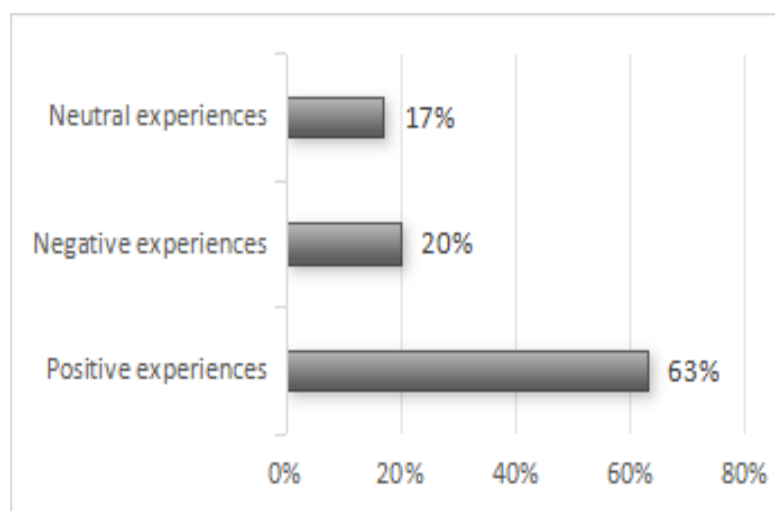**Overall Perception of Group Assignments**

Figure 1: Overall Perception of Group Assignments

From Figure 1, based on the questionnaire responses analysis, of the 60 participants, 63% (38) reported positive or very positive experiences with group assignments, 17% (10) had neutral experiences, and 20% (12) had negative experiences.
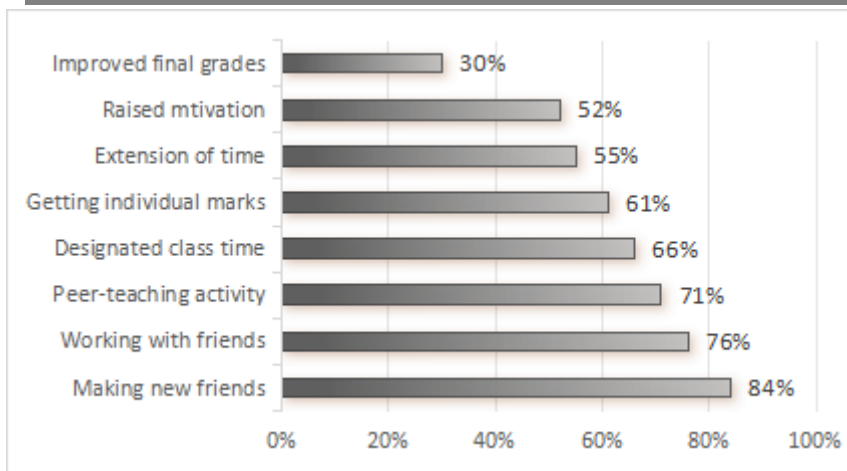
Figure 2: Aspects of Group Assignments that Contribute to Positive Experiences

Figure 2 illustrates aspects the respondents like most when working in groups that contribute to a positive experience, according to predefined criteria (Bentley and Warwick, 2013). For the respondents with positive experiences (n=38), the most common aspects included "made new friends" 84% (32); "worked with friends" 76% (29); and "peer-teaching activity" 71% (27).

The other three aspects that contribute to the respondents' excellent experience include having designated class time to complete group assignments (66%, 25), getting individual evaluations and marks (61%, 23), and getting an extended period to finish the group tasks (55%, 21). The least frequently mentioned attributes are that group work raised their motivation (52%, 20) and their final grades were improved because of the group assignment (30%, 11). Of respondents with negative experiences (n=12), 42% (5) expressed that they were unable to identify any positive aspects of group assignments.

Generally, while the majority acknowledged the positive experiences of working together as a team, they also highlighted the drawbacks associated with group assignments, according to the preset factors. From the analysis of the respondents' feedback, the three most often mentioned issues were free riders, unfair workload distribution, and interpersonal conflicts between group members. On the other hand, difficulty in scheduling common times for group meetings and troublesome group members were the only issues that were less commonly mentioned.

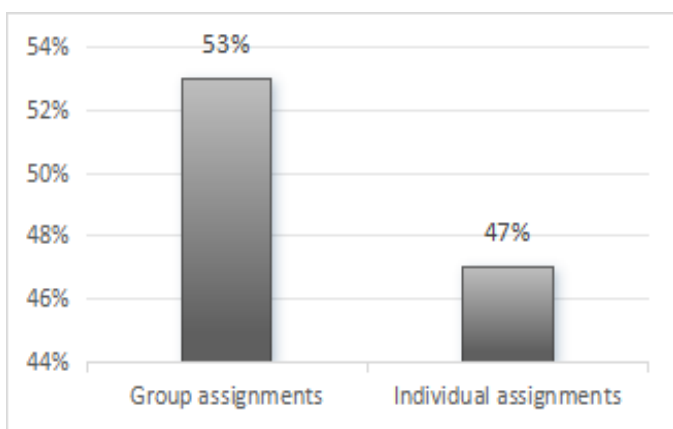**Students' Preference for Group Assignments**

Figure 3: Students' Preference for Type of Assignments

As a result of analysing the survey answers, from Figure 3, among the 60 participants, just over half (53%, 32) expressed a favourable inclination towards group assignments despite their challenges; conversely, 47% (28) preferred alternative assessment methods. The student's preferences regarding group versus individual assignments are notably similar.
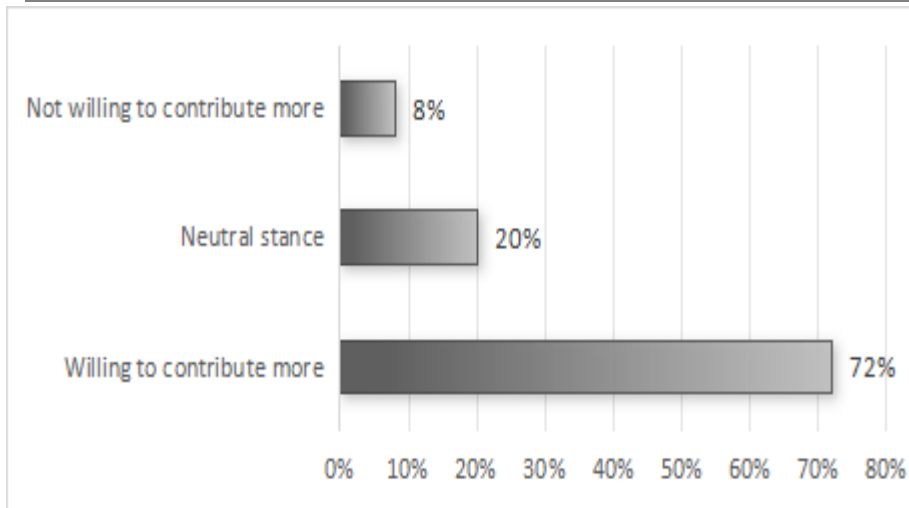
Figure 4: Students' Willingness to Do Extra Tasks

However, when asked whether they were willing to contribute more than their group members to complete the assignment, surprisingly, the majority of the respondents did not mind doing so (72%, 43) for several reasons. From this category (n=43), 60% (26) said they would do more to raise their grades and the quality of the assignment. A smaller portion (35%, 15) were willing to do extra jobs because they believed in the knowledge they would get from the tasks, while only 16% (7) were willing to do it to assist the other members of the group.

Additionally, about 20% (12) of the respondents expressed a neutral stance when asked about contributing more, while about 8% (5) declined the extra work since doing so would double their burden, and they became irritated by the free riders who assumed that other members would do their part regardless of their lack of contribution.

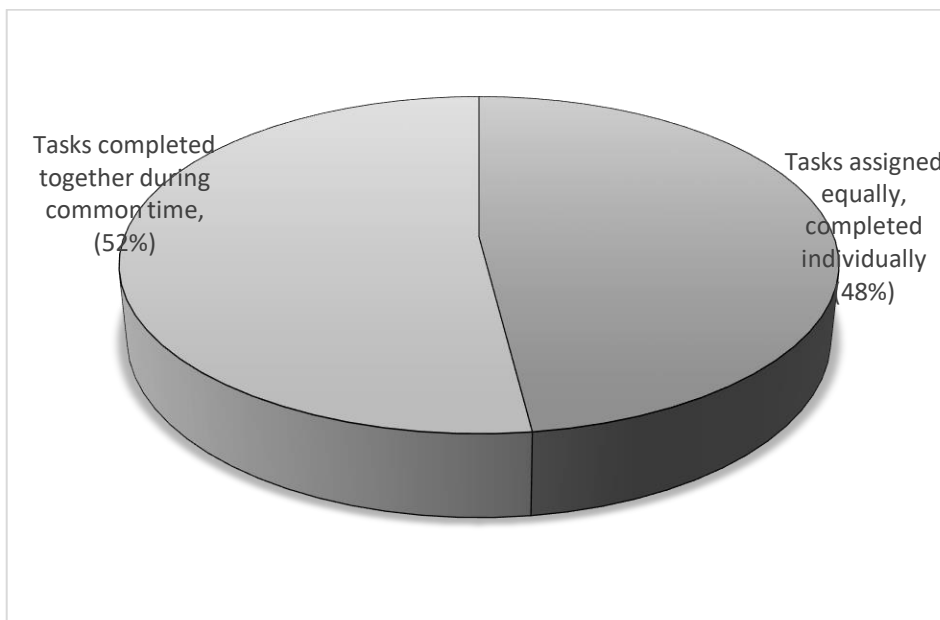**Strategies to Ensure Group Members' Fair Contributions**

Figure 5: Tasks Delegation Strategy

From the analysis of survey feedback, the students developed several strategies to ensure fair contributions from all group members and to manage those who did not fully participate. For task delegation strategy among groupmates, Figure 5 shows that the respondents were almost equally divided, with 48% believing the tasks should be assigned equally to each one in the group; it was the individual's responsibility to complete it following the agreed method. On the contrary, the other half hold a different view, believing that tasks should be completed together during their common time to ensure equal distribution of workload among everyone.
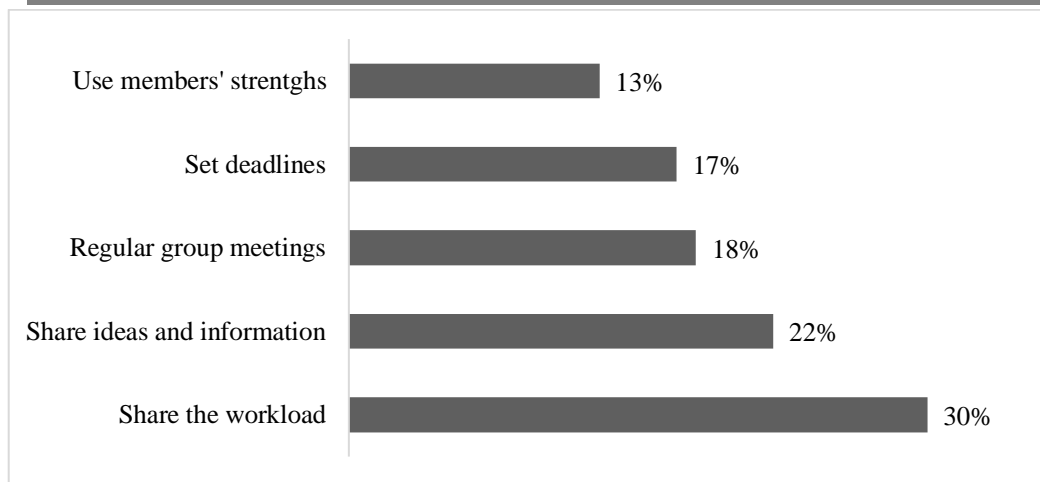
Figure 6: Strategies to Ensure Equal Involvement

To ensure equal involvement from all group members in accomplishing the assignment within the given timeframe, according to Figure 5, the most popular strategy is to share the workload (30%) so that everyone is aware of each other's tasks. The second most preferred is sharing ideas and information (22%), ensuring that no member is left to struggle alone if they are unsure how to proceed. Next, the students believe that regular group meetings (18%) and setting deadlines (17%) are both essential strategies for ensuring everyone is progressing at the right pace. Additionally, making use of other members' strengths in the subject or topic (13%) is also considered a smart strategy to enhance participation among teammates. Yet, all of the students were unanimous in stating that having a mutual agreement to help each other in finishing the tasks was not considered important in enhancing fairness in members' contributions.
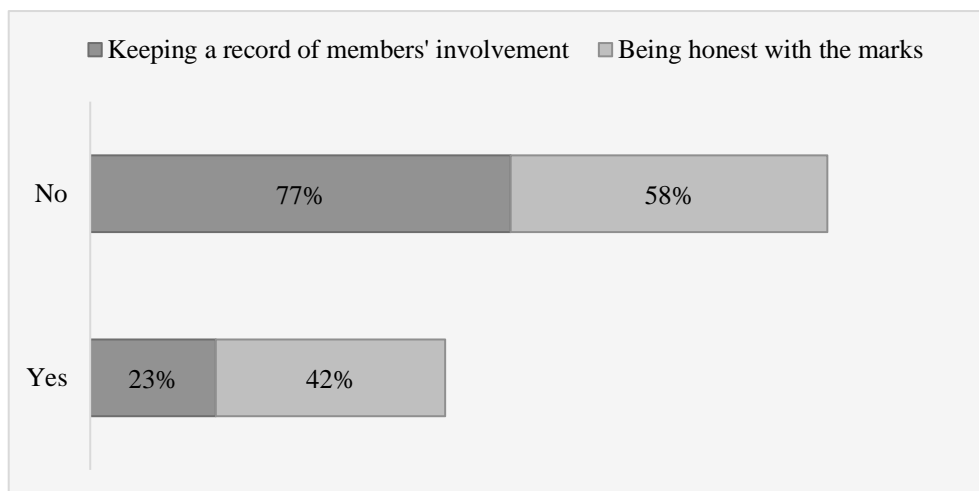

Figure 7: Strategies to Rate Members for Peer Review

When asked about an approach they took to grade each group member's contribution during a peer review at the end of the semester, from Figure 7, the majority of the respondents stated that keeping track of each member's involvement was not their priority (77%), as they were busy with other faculty activities. In comparison, the remaining (23%) believed that keeping a record of involvement is important for accurate peer reviews. In line with this, less than half of the students were frank and gave low marks to a group member with poor contribution (42%); meanwhile, the larger group (58%) believed that everyone should receive the same grade, as they were classmates, and wanted to achieve outstanding results together since they were friends.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

In response to research question 1, whether students perceive their experience with group assignments as positive or negative, it appears that students generally perceive group assignments positively, as they are more manageable and less stressful. Allocating class time to complete the tasks, for instance, allows effective

collaboration without extra hours' burdens. This aligns with Dobao's (2020) findings that institutional support improves group dynamics. Then, individual evaluations guarantee fairness in marks because each member's contribution is taken into consideration. Extended deadlines further reduce stress and support higher-quality work. There are also other students with poor group work experiences or who do not feel that group assignments affect their motivation or grade. However, issues such as unequal participation remain problematic. Nonetheless, structured support is critical to forge a general preference for group work.

To address research question 2, which examines whether students prefer group or individual assignments, many students express a preference for group assignments over individual ones due to the improved collaboration experiences they provide. Most students are willing to do more work compared to their peers to get better grades and improve the quality of their assignments. This is further backed up by the motivation of being able to contribute to a better result and learning relevant knowledge instead of merely helping other group members. However, some students resist doing extra work, especially when it increases their burden or frustration with the less committed group members. Hence, even though the students enjoy the sharing aspect of the group assignments, the willingness to take on extra responsibilities reflects the issues of inconsistent participation as well as the dedication to a high-quality result. This supports Dobao's (2020) claim that a well-structured group project motivates active learning and better engagement with the tasks.

There is disagreement among students over whether assignment tasks should be completed as a whole group during group meetings or distributed equally among group members. This includes sharing the workload, exchanging ideas, having regular meetings, and meeting deadlines, although agreeing to help each other is not seen as necessary for fairness. Regarding the peer evaluations, in general, students do not track other members' contributions. Some students may be honest with their grading; others consider providing the same grade for all group members in the pursuit of unity towards collective success. It is an act of balance between quest and harmony.

To answer research question 3 regarding strategies used to accomplish group assignments fairly, this research highlights that students adopt certain strategies to manage group dynamics and to ensure fairness and accountability; this is an issue of interpersonal challenges and performing for collective success. This aligns closely with Johnson and Johnson's (2009) research, which emphasises the value of active participation and collaboration in group tasks. Students adopt similar strategies to guarantee fair contributions and manage group dynamics. Additionally, in this process, fairness is achieved through teamwork, but active students also gain a deeper understanding of the tasks and add more detail to the assignment. This tallies well with Storch's 2005 argument that in collective activities, such as problem-solving activities and project work, students are given many more meaningful opportunities not only to use language but also to interact with peers. Students employ strategies to ensure fair contributions from all group members, a collaborative problem-solving approach that Storch highlights.

In conclusion, the research indicates that students generally appreciate being engaged in group assignments, even though they occasionally encounter challenges. The preference for group assignments over individual tasks suggests that students perceive benefits associated with working together, despite obstacles such as uneven contributions or differences in work style. Such a preference is a pointer to the potential inherent in group assignments to provide a richer, more dynamic learning environment in which students can better interact among themselves and deepen their knowledge about course material.

As recommendations to further enhance the effectiveness of group assignments, lecturers may continue to allocate actual class time for students to complete their group assignments to ensure collaboration and level out the workload among all students. Lecturers may also need to consider extending deadlines to minimise stress and allow for higher-quality work. Other than that, clear guidelines on the distribution of tasks will help navigate differences in opinion and enhance effectiveness. Next, lecturers may want to emphasise the importance of tracking each group member's contributions and incorporating effective peer review systems to maintain accountability and group cohesion. Finally, fostering a culture of mutual support can improve collaboration and overall group performance. Such strategies can improve group assignment outcomes and address common challenges in collaborative learning.

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