SELECTED SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES OF THEIR TEACHERS' GROUP WORK ASSESSMENT PRACTICES

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Abstract

Group work is an educational tool designed to develop learners' cognitive and social skills at different levels of education across various subjects. We felt that it is important to see learners' perspectives of group work assessment as they are clients that stay with teachers the whole year. To this effect, the study aimed to examine grades 11 and 12 students' perspectives of their teachers' group work assessment practices in Southern Nations Nationalities and Peoples' Regional State (SNNPRS), Ethiopia. The study adopted a descriptive survey research design as the purpose of the study was to survey and describe the assessment practices. To achieve this, 270 students were selected with a systematic random sampling technique for a questionnaire survey. However, only 212 students filled the questionnaire properly. To examine whether the expected mean values were statistically significant or not as compared to the observed mean scores at both an item and scale levels, a one-sample t-test was applied. The results showed that the assessment of group work focuses on the assessment of group product with little consideration of group process and individual contribution to the group work. Besides, the teachers used to employ limited group-based assessment tools such as group presentations, written group reports, and paper-pencil tests (tests, quizzes, examinations) which are aligned with the assessment of group product while tools that may foster group process and individual accountability like individual written reports, presentations, portfolios, demonstrations, and debates were inadequately used. Based on the findings, it was recommended that SNNPRS Education Bureau has to organize induction for teachers on group work assessment skills.

Keywords: assessment practice; assessment tool; group assessment; group process; group outcome

INTRODUCTION

Cooperative learning (CL) is a student-centered pedagogical practice in which students work together in a small group to support one another and improve their learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1999). Working with others enhances student involvement in learning, sharing of ideas, responding to others' reactions, sharpening thinking, and deepening understanding (Johnson, 2007). Besides, CL promotes the cognitive and social development of learners at all levels of education and across different subject domains (Johnson & Johnson, 2002; Krol, Veenman & Voeten, 2002; Sharan, 2010; Slavin, 1996).

Cooperative learning emanated from various theories among which the sociocultural theory (SCT) is dominant. According to the theory, learning is viewed as a social process that takes place through reciprocal social interactions among learners to achieve shared goals (Johnson & Johnson, 2008; Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky (1978) claimed that "individual learners first learn through individual-to-individual social interaction and then knowledge is individually internalized" (p.84). The theory implies that learning takes place when students interact with each other in the group to solve problems beyond their current level with the support of a more knowledgeable person (teacher) or their peers (Davidson & Major, 2014; Johnson, et al., 2014). Therefore, cooperative group work is a central and valued learning method through which CL is realized.

In group work, students discuss ideas, explain their understanding, exchange ideas, solve problems, and help each other to achieve shared goals (Gillies, 2014). Also, group work increases student performance, interaction, self-esteem, inter-group relations, critical and creative thinking, and problem-solving skills (Baloche & Brody, 2017; Johnson & Johnson, 2002; Slavin, 1996). Moreover, it provides a non-threatening, more comfortable, and supportive learning environment in which students practice and improve leadership, communication, social, and conflict resolution skills (Cheong, 2010; Gupta, 2004).

In the Ethiopian context, studies have been done on CL at various educational levels and disciplines. For instance, some of the studies were carried out on cooperative learning practices (Muhammed, 2012; Weldemariam & Girmay, 2015; Zeleke & Tsega, 2015), attitudes towards CL (Hanna, 2015; Teweldebrhan, 2015; Wondwosen, 2017; Zeleke, Fekadu & Ketema, 2015),

knowledge, attitude and practice of CL (Berhanu, 2013), practices and challenges of CL (Belilew, 2015; Birhanu, 2019), perception and practices of CL (Wossen, 2011), practices and challenges of teachers in monitoring learners' group performances and administrating feedback (Zeleke, 2015), oral group lessons in promoting CL (Wondwosen, 2008), and beliefs and practices of cooperative group work assessment (Abate & Getu, 2020a).

Cooperative group work will be effective if it is implemented properly as placing students in groups and offering group tasks alone will not bring the desired changes to the learning (Cheong, 2010). To be effective, teachers should implement CL as per planned procedures and execute the roles they have been given. Among the roles teachers are expected to exercise in cooperative group work for successful output of learning, assessment of group work is primary (Biggs, 2003; Casal, 2016; Gillies & Boyle, 2010; Rust, 2002). Effective assessment of cooperative group work is a drive that plays a vital role in directing quality learning of cooperative group work (Casal, 2016; Gillies & Boyle, 2010; Rust, 2002) if carried out as suggested since it has the potential to determine the contents and methods of learning (Biggs, 2003). To this effect, examining and documenting cooperative group work assessment practices is of paramount importance.

Concerning cooperative group work assessment practices, Abate and Getu (2020a) studied cooperative group work assessment practices both from students and teachers' perspectives in selected secondary schools in Ethiopia. The study included 213 randomly selected teachers for the questionnaire survey and two purposively selected teachers for the interview at each school. Besides, five students were selected at each school for FGD to probe qualitative data on their teachers' group work assessment practices. The results showed teachers dominantly assess group work product with little consideration of the assessment of group work process and individual contribution to the group work. Besides, the duo mentioned the majority of the teachers used to grade the group's outcome and give equal marks to all as if everybody contributed equally to the group work.

Similarly, Le, Janssen, and Wubbels (2018) showed that both teachers and students unanimously agreed that teachers dominantly focused on the assessment of group outcomes and gained knowledge of individuals with little emphasis on the assessment of the collaborative process. Also, both bodies disclosed they had no detailed assessment criteria to assess how students worked in

groups. Consequently, the students used to give the same and maximum scores to each other regardless of the differences in individual contributions to the group work (Le, Janssen & Wubbels, 2018). Nonetheless, the same mark to every member could be unfair as there are "free-riders" in the group who contributed little or nothing but received the same mark as others who have carried out the work (Cheng & Warren, 2000; Johnston & Miles, 2004).

To be fair in the assessment of cooperative group work, studies suggested the involvement of students in the assessment process via peer- and self-assessments (Fellenz, 2006; McInnis & Devlin, 2002; Ross, Rolheiser & Hogaboam-Gray, 1998). The involvement of students in the assessment process via peer- and self-assessments coupled with teacher assessment would reduce social loafing (Ross, Rolheiser & Hogaboam-Gray, 1998). Teachers are recommended to engage students in setting assessment criteria, transparent on what will be assessed and what will be done, and make the scoring key and interpretive schemes visible to students to ensure fairness and acceptability (McInnis & Devlin, 2002). In the same way, other researchers also emphasized the importance of ensuring individual accountability in cooperative group work through assessing individual contribution to the group work to balance individual and group accountability and optimize learning (Barkley, Cross & Howell-Major, 2004; Slavin, 1995 as cited in Ross & Rolheiser, 2003). However, if the students could not criticize their friends/themselves, peer and self-assessments may not be the best tools to assess group work, unless they are educated on the importance and assessment procedures of peer and self-assessments for development (Hassanien, 2006).

In addition to the assessment of cognitive aspects of group work, collaborative/social skills, such as leadership, communication, social and conflict resolution skills, which students develop while working in a group, should also be assessed (Cheong, 2010; Sharan, 2010; Slavin, 1996). These could be done through students' active engagement and participation via self and peer assessments. Yet, studies indicated teachers used to assess primarily group productivity at the expense of collaborative and other skills (Abate & Getu, 2020a; Le, Janssen & Wubbels, 2018).

With regards to group work assessment tools, Gillies and Boyle (2010) disclosed the assessment tools teachers employed were more informal than formal at large. The teachers used to take anecdotal shreds of evidence going around groups and observe who was active in the task, and

who was proceeding correctly in the groups. Besides, discussions and presentations, followed by an individual assessment were the common assessment methods. Moreover, they assessed their students via self-assessment tools on specific learning issues. Along with the same line of discussion, Le, Janssen, and Wubbels (2018) revealed teachers employed group-based reports, diaries, peer- and self-assessments. Informal assessment of going around and observation for interaction on the tasks were reported as well.

In the same way, the study conducted by Abate and Getu (2020a) confirmed the dominant group work assessment tools were monitoring, observations, traditional paper-pencil tests, written group reports, group presentations, and group discussions while individual reflective diary, portfolios, interviews, project works, demonstrations, experiments, and debates were rarely used. Jaques (2000) suggested the use of different assessment tools would moderate the group mark to the entire group. The author further noted shared group grade, peer assessment, and peer feedback on individual contribution to the group work, project work, exam, and oral assessments as useful assessment tools in cooperative group work assessment.

Though there are many studies on various aspects of CL in Ethiopia, studies done on the assessment practices of group work are very limited (Abate & Getu, 2020a &b). Both studies by Abate and Getu (2020a & b) were conducted from teachers' perspectives with little attention to the voices of the students. Hence, it seems that there is a scarcity of studies on the assessment of group work from students' perspectives in particular. Therefore, this study aimed to examine students' perspectives of their teachers' cooperative group work assessment practices with reference to grades 11 and 12 students in selected secondary schools at Southern Nations Nationalities and Peoples Regional State (SNNPRS), Ethiopia. Specifically, the study sought to answer two specific objectives which are: (i) to examine students' perspectives of their teachers' group work assessment practices in terms of assessment of group process and product; and assessors involved; and (ii) to scrutinize students' perspectives of their teachers' group work assessment tools in the assessment of cooperative group work.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The purpose of this study was to examine secondary school students' perspectives of their teachers' cooperative group work assessment practices in terms of assessment of group process and product, and assessors involved in the assessment. As well, it dealt with cooperative group work assessment tools teachers employed in the assessment of cooperative group work. To this effect, a descriptive survey research design was adopted as it could enable collection of data from a large sample and describe the study issues as they are in the fields (Creswell, 2009). Data was collected through a close-ended questionnaire from selected grades 11 and 12 students of five secondary schools in SNNPRS, Ethiopia.

Participants of the Study

The study was conducted on secondary school students (grades 11 and 12) of five schools in SNNPRS, Ethiopia. The schools considered for the study included Arba Minch Secondary School, Karat Secondary School, Sawula Secondary School, Merab-Abaya Secondary School, and Konso Secondary School. These schools were selected because of their relative proximity to the researchers' workplace, Arba Minch University. The data was collected between June 2019 and January 2020.

The target population of the study in the five schools was about 1,251 students. To estimate the sample size of the target population, an online sample size determination method was used (https://www.qualtrics.com/experience-management/research/determine-sample-size/). Accordingly, the sample size was found to be a total of 270 students from the five schools with n^{th} value of 5. Therefore, 270 students were selected from the five secondary schools for a questionnaire survey through a systematic random technique of every fifth from the list. Nevertheless, only 212 students filled the questionnaire properly.

Data Collection Instrument

The purpose of the student questionnaire was to obtain quantitative data on their perspectives of their teachers' assessment practices of cooperative group. For this reason, a close-ended questionnaire was prepared based on the literature on a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly

disagree (1), disagree (2), undecided (3), agree (4), and strongly agree (5). The questionnaire consisted of (n=33) items with two parts. The first part focuses on the group work assessment practices (n=15) and has three dimensions- assessment of group process (n=7), product (n=3), and assessors involved in the assessment (n=5). The second part focuses on assessment tools (n= 18) teachers employed.

The internal consistency reliability tests were conducted with Cronbach's alpha as indicated in table1.

Table 1

Internal consistency reliability of factors and scales

Factor 1 (assessment practices)	**No of items (N)**	**Cronbach alpha**
F1 (group process)	7	.88
F 2 (assessors involved)	5	.78
F3 (group product)	3	.76
Scale	15	.89
Factor 2 (assessment tools)	18	.94

As indicated in the table, Cronbach's alpha values at scale and sub-scale levels were > .7 cut off point. To this effect, the tool has been proved to be internally consistent to measure students' perspectives of their teachers' cooperative group work assessment practices at scale and sub-scale levels.

As to content validity, Item Content Validity Index (I-CVIs) for clarity, relevance, and appropriateness were between acceptable content validity of 0.79–1.00. The Content Validity Index for scale (S-CVI/Ave) was 0.92, which is ≥ 0.90 cut-off value. Therefore, the instrument seems appropriate and content valid.

Methods of Data Analysis

The data collected through the questionnaire was encoded into SPSS version 21 for analysis. Average values of observed mean and expected mean at both items and scale levels were used as units of analysis to see how much students' perspectives of their teachers' assessment practices deviated

from the observed mean. One sample *t*-test was used to examine whether there was a statistically significant difference or not between the observed mean and expected mean (3.00) at both items and scale levels. Before applying a one-sample *t*-test, however, the data were checked for the assumptions of the *t*-test to avoid possible flaws that might have originated from violation of the assumptions. Also, a five percent ($\alpha = 0.05$) level of significance was used throughout the study.

RESULTS

This study sought to examine secondary school students' perspectives of their teachers' group work assessment practices in terms of assessment of process and product, assessors involved, and tools of assessment employed. The analyses have been presented below with tables.

Students' Perspectives of their Teachers' Group Work Assessment Practices

Assessment of Group Process

Table 2

Students' Perspective on their Teachers' Assessment of Group Process

		Test value= 3		
	Items	**Mean**	**t**	**P**
1	frequently checks the contribution of each group members to the group work	2.56	-5.01	.002
2	gives relevant feedback on an individual contribution to the group work	2.82	-5.3	.000
3	gives relevant feedback timely on the performance of group work	3.33	4.11	.000
4	uses peer assessments to assess the contribution of each member to the group work	3.10	1.08	.28
5	regularly monitors if group members listen to each other during group work	3.66	6.45	.000
6	oversees the respect each group member gives to others' opinions in the group work	3.52	5.34	.000
7	requests group members to report the communication they had between them	3.34	2.89	.004
	Sub-scale	**3.20**	**2.17**	**.03**

N=212, df=211

As indicated in table 2 above, the observed mean values for items 3, 5, 6 &7 of the questionnaire were found to be significantly higher than the expected mean value of 3.00 at p< .004.

On the other hand, the observed mean values of items 1 & 2 were significantly lower than the expected mean value of 3.00 at p< .002. Divergent to this, statistically no significant difference was found between the observed and expected mean value of 3.00 for item number 4 (p > .05). In this view, it seems that the students agreed their teachers used to give relevant feedback timely, monitor if group members listen to one other in group work, oversee the respect each group member gives to others' opinions, and request group members to report the communications they had between them above the optimum (expected mean value of 3.00). Conversely, the students revealed their teachers did not frequently check (did below the expected mean value of 3.00) the contribution of each group member to the group work and offer relevant feedback on an individual contribution to the group work. Yet, the students remained undecided on whether their teachers use peer assessments or not to assess the contribution of each member to the group work.

Assessors Involved in the Assessment of Group Work

Table 3

Students' Perspective on Assessors Involved in the Assessment of Group Work

		Test value =3		
	Items	**Mean**	**t**	**P**
8	involve students in suggesting assessment tasks for group work	3.92	12.0	.000
9	involve students in preparing assessment criteria (rubrics) of group work	3.32	4.11	.000
10	use student peer assessments in assessing cooperative group work	3.05	.51	.61
11	use student self-assessments in assessment for learning in group work	3.08	.92	.36
12	ask the support each group member gave to other group members	3.71	7.52	.001
	Sub-scale	3.41	8.11	.000

N=212, df=211

Table 3 shows the observed mean values for items 8, 9, & 12 of the questionnaire were significantly higher than the expected mean value of 3.00 at p< .001. However, there were no statistically significant differences between the observed and the expected mean value for items 10 &

11. The results showed that teachers used to involve students in suggesting assessment tasks and preparation of assessment rubrics. Also, the students confirmed that their teachers follow up group work through monitoring or asking the support each group member provided to the other group members above the optimum. Surprisingly, the students remained ambivalent in judging their teachers on whether they involved in the assessment of students learning via peer and self-assessments.

Assessment of Group Product (outcome)

Table 4

Students Perspectives on their Teachers' Assessment of Group Product

	Test value =3 Items	Mean	t	P
13	use only his/her assessments in assessing group work	3.37	3.67	.000
14	give each member the same mark regardless of the quality of work done by each	3.55	7.28	.000
15	assess the final group outcome than group work processes	3.47	4.75	.000
	Sub-scale	3.46	4.32	.000

N=212, df= 211

Table 4 shows all the items of assessment of group product sub-scale observed mean values were significantly higher than the expected mean value of 3.00 at $p < .001$. The students testified that their teachers favored the assessment of group product than the process and offered the same mark to all regardless of the quality of work done by each member of the group. Besides, the students verified that their teachers' assessments are dominant in the assessment of group work.

Students' Perspectives of their Teachers' Group Work Assessment Methods (Tools)

Table 5

Students' Perspectives of their Teachers' Group Work Assessment Methods (Tools)

	Test value =3			
	Items	**Mean**	**t**	**p**
1	Student self-assessments	3.01	.15	.88
2	Peer assessments	3.10	1.08	.28
3	Teacher assessments	4.00	10.9	.000
4	Teacher observations/monitoring by going around while working on task	3.39	4.09	.000
5	Teacher observations with observation check lists	3.16	1.85	.065
6	Paper-and- pencil assessments (tests, quizzes, examinations)	4.00	6.16	.000
7	Group written reports after students worked together	3.62	8.69	.000
8	Individual written reports after students worked together	2.57	-5.13	.000
9	Individual reflective diary	2.83	-5.8	.000
10	Group presentations	3.32	3.41	.001
11	Individual presentations	2.42	-5.24	.000
12	Group discussions	2.90	-1.19	.233
13	Portfolio assessments	2.47	-5.70	.000
14	Interviews on work done in group	2.14	-12.1	.000
15	Project works	1.59	-33.5	.000
16	Demonstrations	1.41	-43.6	.000
17	Experiments	1.34	-50.9	.000
18	Debates	1.33	-51.6	.000
	N=212, df= 211			

Table 5 demonstrates statistically significant higher observed mean values from the expected mean of 3.00 at p< .001 for items numbered from 3, 4, 6, 7 & 10. Conversely, statistically significant but lower mean values from the expected mean of 3.00 at p < .001 were attained for items 8, 9, 11 & 13-18. Nonetheless, statistically, non-significant mean differences were obtained between observed and expected mean values for items of number 1, 2, 5 & 12 at p >0.05. The results showed that students reported their teachers used monitoring and observations of going around while groups work on a task, group presentations, written group work reports, and traditional paper-and-pencil assessments (tests, quizzes, examinations) above the optimum. Besides, the students reported their teachers' assessments dominate over the students' assessments of their learning. On the contrary, the students reported their teachers did not satisfactorily apply individual written reports, reflective diaries, and presentations, portfolio assessments, interviews, project works, demonstrations, experiments, and debates as group work assessment tools. However, the result also pointed out that the students were undecided on their teachers' involvement with them through peer assessments and self-assessments. On top of this, the students remained in doubt regarding whether their teachers assessed the group work through observations with observation checklists and group discussions as assessment tools.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Discussion

It was already introduced that the specific objectives of this study were to examine cooperative group work assessment practices in terms of assessment of group process, product, and assessors involved as well as assessment tools employed in the assessment of group work as viewed by the students. As to the assessment of the group work process, it seems that teachers conducted the informal assessment with more focus on social skills by supervising the respect the students give each other in their communication, monitoring if group members listen to each other during group work, and observing the respect each group member gives to others' opinions in the group work. Concerning the assessment of cognitive aspects in the group process, the students disagreed that their teachers check the contribution of each group member to the group work and offer relevant feedback on an individual contribution to the group work. This may show that teachers have not ensured individual student accountability in the assessment of the group work process. This finding agrees with early works in

which both teachers and students unanimously agreed teachers prevailingly used to assess group outcomes and gained knowledge of individuals with diminutive importance to the assessment of group process (Abate & Getu, 2020a & 2020b; Le, Janssen & Wubbels, 2018).

Concerning assessors involved in the assessment of group work, the data from the questionnaire showed teachers involved the students in peripheral issues which included preparation of assessment rubrics and making suggestions of assessment tasks of group work. Yet, the students remained ambivalent in deciding whether their teachers involved them in the assessment of their learning via self and peer assessments. However, another work conducted on secondary school teachers' and students' perspectives of cooperative group work assessment challenges, through the use of interview and focus group discussion, showed that teachers rarely involved students via self and peer-assessments in the assessment of group work (Abate & Getu, 2020b). Besides, the students responded that their teachers used their assessments dominantly in the assessment of group work. Moreover, it was replied that teachers favor the assessment of group product than the process and offer the same mark to all regardless of the level of engagement and quality of work done by each member of the group. Early works also corroborate this finding that teachers used to assess the outcome of the group work with little or no attention to the assessment of group work process and individual contribution to the group work and offer equal marks to all group members despite the differences (Abate & Getu, 2020a; & b; Ross, Rolheiser & Hogaboam-Gray, 1998; Le, Janssen & Wubbels, 2018).

This assessment practice may discredit the essence of group work since the assessment of group process and individual contribution to the group work has been abandoned in the assessment of group work. Additionally, such assessment practices would foster social loafing or "free-riders" (Ross, Rolheiser & Hogaboam-Gray, 1998) who contributed little or nothing but received the same mark as others who have carried out the work (Cheng & Warren, 2000; Johnston & Miles, 2004). Once the students perceive the group work assessment system as unfair due to equal marks to all for unequal contributions, they may consider it unjust treatment; and this incident, in turn, might spoil their approaches to group work assignments in the future (Livingstone & Lynch, 2000).

As to group work assessment tools teachers employed in the assessment of group work, the results disclosed that students agreed that their teachers used to apply informal assessment of monitoring/ observing by going around while groups work on the task, group presentations, written

group work reports, and traditional paper-pencil assessments (tests, quizzes, examinations). On top of this, teacher assessments were the overriding assessment tools with negligible involvement of students via self-and peer assessments. In contrast, individual written reports, individual reflective diaries, individual presentations, portfolio assessments, interviews, project works, demonstrations, experiments, and debates were inadequately exercised as group work assessment tools. This finding is consistent with others too (Abate & Getu, 2020a; Gillies & Boyle, 2010; Le, Janssen & Wubbels, 2018). This implies that teachers apply limited group-based assessment tools with little or no attention to the assessment tools which could assess group process and individual accountability. Nevertheless, the literature suggests the use of various assessment tools to moderate the group mark to the entire group process (Jaques, 2000).

There might be many reasons beyond teachers' use of limited assessment tools in the assessment of group work. Among these, studies showed that limitations of the educational context like large class sizes and teacher workloads (Davies, 2009), tensions between administrative and educational purposes for the use of assessment instruments, and state-mandated assessments could influence the assessment of group work. Besides, teachers' experiences and their perspectives of the role of assessment could be among the factors that might influence their choices of assessment tools in the assessment of group work (Cheng, Rogers & Hu, 2004).

Conclusions

It seems that the students saw their teachers' focus on group outcome than group process in the assessment of group work. Besides, the students observed that their teachers' assessment paid limited or no attention to the assessment of individual contribution to the group work which could have ensured individual accountability. As well, the students detected equal marks to all for unequal contributions as a problem that influenced the assessment endeavor of group work. In the eyes of the students, the teachers seem to apply limited group-based informal assessment tools while assessment tools that could be useful to assess group process and individual accountability have been inadequately employed.

Based on the findings, it is recommended that SNNPRS Education Bureau has to organize inductions for teachers on cooperative group work in general and on group work assessment in

particular. On top of this, teacher education institutes should consider how to address group work assessment skills in their curricula to prepare well-equipped teachers.

As there is no study without limitation, this study has got its limitation. This study employed only a questionnaire survey to collect data from secondary school students of grades 11 and 12 in five selected schools at SNNPRS, Ethiopia. Further study should be carried with multiple tools from different perspectives for a comprehensive understanding of the issue and conclusive outcomes.

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Conflict of interests

There is no conflict of interests.

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