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THE METHOD OF ENSURING EQUAL PARTICIPATION OF STUDENTS DURING GROUP WORK IN THE CRISIS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract. This study is a small-scale action research on the problem of EFL/ESL students' participation in group activities during the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic. The main stages of the research were conducted in the academic year of 2020/21. The population of the study is twenty-eight Ukrainian secondary school students and three teachers. The research aims at designing a method for ensuring learner engagement in and equal contribution to the group project during distance learning. The methodological basis of this study is the theories of "The Model of Willingness to Communicate", "Collaborative Learning" and "Social Interdependence". The quantitative and qualitative data have been collected through the mixed-method approach, in particular via pedagogical observation, surveys (teacher interviews and student questionnaires), peer evaluation, and mathematical statistics (descriptive and frequency methods). The analysis of scientific pedagogical and psychological literature on student engagement during traditional (in-person) and distance (synchronous and asynchronous) learning, including the use of social networks in education (Viber, Zoom, etc.), helped to identify the main factors that affect learner engagement and equal participation in group activities, such as psychological (self-confidence, anxiety, shyness, and personality), group formation (group size, teacher/student-formed, and homogeneous/heterogeneous), monitoring (self, peer and teacher) and evaluation (peer and teacher). The results of this study demonstrate that the teacher greatly influences the success and equality of student participation in small-group activities. Identifying reasons for unequal participation in the target group of learners, considering students' personality traits and individual needs, and using appropriate planning, organizing and monitoring strategies are the key to their active engagement and effective group work. The results of this study could be used by researchers and practitioners working in the sectors of secondary and tertiary education.

Keywords: group work, project work, student participation, distance learning, EFL/ESL classroom, learning/teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic.

1. INTRODUCTION

As instructors of English and a university student, we faced with unequal participation of students during group work. However, this problem is relevant in institutions of general secondary education. During internship at school, performing the roles of student teacher and teaching practice supervisors, in the English classrooms we observed that during group activities

usually one or two students dominated, while others were less active or not engaged at all. As Harmer (2007b) points out, such students stay in "social loafing" (p. 44). This leads to the problem of unequal participation during group activities. Furthermore, in this way one of its main advantages, which is involvement of all students in a big-size classroom, is lost. In the works of scholars such as Cohen and Lotan (2014); Cohen et al. (2004) and Harmer (2007a, 2007b) this issue is studied and different ways of overcoming this problem are suggested. In our research, we continue the study of this phenomenon, which has become even more relevant during distance learning in the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is evidenced by the recent publications of Alia (2022); Burgos et al. (2021); Davidson and Katopodis (2020); Limniou et al. (2022); Quigley et al. (2022); Spencer (2020), and Zarzycka et al. (2021). Thus, the aims of this study are as follows: to investigate the activity of EFL/ESL students during the completion of a small-group activity; to find out factors that will ensure their equal participation in group work. The set goal implies the need to do the following: (1) to analyze the scientific literature to determine main factors affecting the equality of participation of students in group work; (2) to develop, substantiate, and test the method of ensuring equal participation of EFL students in group work, during the completion of a communicative task (project), and (3) to develop recommendations for further research of this problem and the implementation of the obtained results in the educational process.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Group work as one of the methods of active learning has been widely used in teaching English as a foreign/second language for many years. It is mostly implemented in cooperative activities, which means that learners are to work together in order to complete a task that is impossible to be accomplished by a single learner. Group work has many applications in English teaching as it may be used in the tasks of different types such as discussions, brainstorming, role-playing, jigsaw, projects, etc. (Harmer, 2007b). This mode of interaction has many advantages. Firstly, it encourages students' independence and autonomy as they have a chance to work together without much teacher involvement. It also gives them an opportunity to exercise their leadership skills because the teacher does not act as leader in this type of interaction. They can also delegate roles and responsibilities for more successful work (Cohen & Lotan, 2014). Secondly, it is much easier to involve all the students in group work than in whole-class interactions. It significantly increases student-talking time. Thirdly, in group work, learners have to work collaboratively and cooperatively, which presupposes that they are learning from each other during analysing, discussing, and exploring ideas. Working with others, they have to respect strengths and weaknesses of their peers and deal with disagreements and different opinions. Finally, working in a group requires higher-order thinking and joint-decision making in order to sort a great amount of information and resources that they get from each participant who has their own background and experience (Cohen et al., 2004). Thus, working in a group contributes to the development of such important social skills (soft skills) in students as the ability to communicate, solve problems, and think creatively (Spencer, 2020). Moreover, "communication and cooperation are important competencies not only for education, but also for professional success in the labor market" in the future (Zarzycka, 2021, p. 2). As any other mode of interaction, group work has also its disadvantages. Among them, we can distinguish the complexity of its organisation and the fact that it is time-consuming. Furthermore, some students find it difficult to work with their classmates without constant teacher supervision (Harmer, 2007a; Spencer, 2020). Therefore, the task of the teacher, especially in crises, is to be able to plan the initial process properly, adapting the structure of lessons, presentation of material, interaction, feedback, motivation, etc. (Burgos, 2021).

Based on the analysis of studies by D. Baker, B. Barker, A. Burke, E. Cohen and R. Lotan, C. Davidson and Ch. Katopodis, I. Kadhom Faroun, M. Limniou et al, J. McCroskey and E. Baer, M. Quigley et. al., P. Rao, A. Rezaei, and J. Spencer, we identified main factors that affect student engagement and the equality of participation in a traditional (in-person) or virtual (online) classroom. They are as follows: psychological (self-confidence, anxiety, shyness, and personality), formation of the group (size, teacher- or student-formed, homogeneous or heterogeneous), evaluation, and monitoring (Davidson, 2020; Kadhom Faroun, 2020; Limniou, 2022; McCroskey, 1985; Quigley, 2022; Rao, 2019; Rezaei, 2018; Spencer, 2020). In particular, the study of unequal participation goes along with the theory of the Model of Willingness to Communicate (WTC) (McCroskey, 1985). Some students who struggle to participate appear to be quite nervous during this mode of interaction. In this case, the main factors that influence their inability to participate appear to be low self-confidence, anxiety, shyness and different types of personality (Barker, 2014). In addition, during online (synchronous/asynchronous) learning student engagement can be influenced by behaviour, affective and cognitive challenges of the learning environment (Limniou, 2022). It also depends on such personal qualities as organisation, self-discipline and ability to develop and use self-regulation learning strategies (Quigley, 2022). A. Rezaei draws our attention to the effect of group size (Rezaei, 2018). Sometimes larger groups have more opportunities for better performance because of bigger amount of resources. However, each member of a larger group contributes less than each member of a smaller group. The ideal size of a group is 4-5 members. It is a moderate amount of students that allows divergent thinking and at the same time presupposes each member's participation (Rao, 2019). Homogenous groups that consist of students with similar abilities tend to complete the task at the same pace. However, for weaker groups it means slower pace and lower expectations than for stronger ones. Letting students form their groups, the teacher should take into account that they tend to be homogenous (Rezaei, 2018). In heterogeneous groups, members learn to use each other as academic and linguistic resources and benefit from each other. It is especially true for low-achieving students who can get help and support from their stronger classmates. Such formation of groups gives an opportunity "to challenge all the students intellectually rather than to teach to 'the middle' or to what is often referred to as the 'lowest common denominator'"(Cohen, 2014, p. 23). Rezaei (2018) suggests that peer assessment may be rather beneficial in group work. It gives students an opportunity to evaluate each member's contribution, which may be fairer than the teacher's assessment that does not have a chance to see the whole process of collaboration. Baker (2008) claims that "when the instructor focuses simply on the end result of a group project, much information is lost about a specific task and relationship behaviors that affect group success" (p. 183). Despite the positive side of peer assessment, it may cause some problems, such as anxiety and fear to judge the classmates that may lead to resentment and worsening of relationships (Rezaei, 2018). Whether a whole group should get the same mark is also a controversial question. One may believe that it is unfair if some members contribute more. In this case the final product is evaluated, not the process. As Burke (2011) puts it, by grading each member of a group separately the teacher focuses more on the process of creating the product and each learner's contribution. Another way of helping learners to succeed in group activities is division of roles and responsibilities. In particular, assigning one of the group members a role of the leader may help the teacher to monitor the process of work by getting from leaders reports on their groups' progress. This leads to the idea of Collaborative Learning, which originates in the work of L. Vygotsky (1978, p. 86), where each member of the group has to contribute their part in order to complete the assignment successfully. It encourages cooperation within the group considering the fact that good result cannot be reached without every student's participation (Davidson & Katopodis, 2020; Rao, 2019; Spencer, 2020).

3. METHOD

This study is a small-scale action research in which the mixed-method approach is used for collecting data. To analyze the obtained qualitative data we use the descriptive method, and for quantitative data, the frequency method. The research question is formulated as follows: "How can teacher encourage students' equal participation in group work?" In our study, we introduce the hypothesis that if the teacher uses the method of conducting a group activity designed according to the target learners' needs, they will ensure their equal participation.

In the initial stage of the action research (the autumn term of the 2020/21 academic year) during our observations of EFL classrooms in a secondary school, we identified the problem, which was unequal participation of students during group work. Then, we determined that the focus of our study would be on the reasons for unequal participation and the ways of solving them. After that, we studied the psychological and pedagogical literature on the problem. Finally, we defined the key research question. The second step in the research was planning. At this stage, it was important to make a clear action plan. We outlined all the actions to be performed in order to complete our research and set deadlines for them as not to miss anything. As soon as the plan was worked out, it was time for implementing it. During that stage, certain actions were taken: the research tools were selected and designed, and data was collected. The practical part of our research was conducted in the spring term of the 2020/21 academic year by means of group projects. The data, the presentation of group projects, and the results of action research were analyzed during the observing stage. Finally, at the reflecting stage, the results were evaluated and reported. It took the authors more than a year to prepare the results of the study for a publication.

The population of the research consisted of twenty-eight Grade 8 b students of the Lyceum #11 of the Ivano-Frankivsk City Council, Ukraine. The target group included fifteen boys and thirteen girls aged 13 to 14. Their level of English was supposed to be pre-intermediate, but not all of them had it. Auditory and visual learning styles prevailed in that class of learners. Most of the students were interested in learning English and had strong motivation. We could also note their good behaviour and timely completion of homework assignments. Three teachers of English with more than ten years of teaching experience took part in our research. They were interviewed for obtaining opinions about arranging group activities and problems that were in focus in our study. Furthermore, the teachers were present during the presentation of group products.

The intervention stage of the research was conducted by means of group projects. In terms of distance learning because of the COVID-19 pandemic, it would be rather difficult to provide other group activities during lessons as there are online time limitations and they are time-consuming to be organized. Considering this situation, it was decided to conduct the group activity out-of-class and then present the results during an online lesson. The students were encouraged to use social media (a network) for communication. The topic of the project was "Travel to English-speaking countries." The learners were split into four groups of five and two groups of four students, each group having one English-speaking country to present. According to Stoytcheva's (2017) research, the Collaborative approach used in distance learning creates favourable conditions for interactions within the group and encourages the formation of an online learning community. Therefore, members of each group were given a chance to split responsibilities and roles themselves and choose a leader who would stay in touch with the researcher (student teacher), as the monitor of the activity, report periodically on their progress, ask questions if there were any, and ask for help if needed. The task consisted in preparing a PowerPoint presentation with interesting information for tourists about the USA, the UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Ireland. All the instructions were given orally during an introductory online lesson and repeated in written form in the Viber chat of Grade 8 b. The learners had a week for the completion of the task, as short-term group projects are less stressful in the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic (Davidson & Katopodis,

2020). They presented their results during two online lessons, the topic of which was "Travelling." The online lessons were conducted using the Zoom platform.

For data collection, such data collection tools as student questionnaire, teacher interview, and peer-evaluation were used. Questionnaire was used for getting both quantitative and qualitative data. It was conducted before the group work activity was carried out. It consisted of ten multiple-choice items and one open-ended question (see Appendix A). The multiple-choice items were aimed at identifying which of the reasons for unequal participation had influence on those particular learners. The first four items were focused on emotional and personal reasons such as self-confidence, anxiety to express opinion, and relationships with classmates. Barker (2014) studied this issue in his paper "Unequal Participation and Willingness to Communicate" and made a conclusion that those factors may prevent some students from taking part in discussions. Items 5-6 took into account the problem of grading group work activities. Its aim was to identify whether the learners' contribution into group project was dependent on their worries about their academic performance. According to Burke (2011), both giving each member of a group the same grade and grading each member individually may have positive and negative outcome. In some cases, learners think that it is unfair, in others, it fosters competition between them; but it may also undermine group solidarity. In the last four items, the learners were required to answer how they felt about group formation and roles distribution. Here we aimed at identifying the type of groups formed in this class of learners, whether they tend to be homogenous or heterogeneous (see Introduction). The open-ended question was made to get the learners' opinion about group work, what they liked and disliked the most, and to give any other comments. The questionnaire was created on the Google Forms platform and was distributed to the twenty-eight learners of Grade 8 b. This tool was chosen because it is one of the most practical ways to gather information from the whole class, especially during distance learning. The answers were anonymous, so the privacy of the respondents was protected and honest opinions were gathered which greatly facilitated the study. Considering those factors the reliability and the effectiveness of this research tool is highly valuated. Teacher interview was selected in order to analyse experienced teachers' approaches to setting up group activities. This tool is useful for eliciting qualitative information and personal opinion from professionals with great experience. It was conducted before the group work activity was carried out. In the interview, three teachers of English took part. The interview consisted of three open-ended questions (see Appendix B). Each question focused on different aspects of conducting group work activities. The first one took into account the problem of formation of groups, whether teachers or students should form them. It was chosen in order to (dis)prove the results of the research of Fiechtner and Davis (2016), who stated that 40 per cent of their respondents considered groups formed by the students themselves to be their 'worst group experience' (p. 60). The second question focused on the problem of group size and roles distribution. We were interested in whether the learners of the target group should be (not) given a chance to select their own roles. The last question was aimed at getting the teachers' opinion about grading group work activities. We needed to identify whether they grade a group as a whole or each member separately and how to take into account everyone's contribution in this case. We consider this tool quite effective as we had a chance to get advice from experienced educators who teach the learners in focus. We examined their opinions, analysed their ideas, and made our own conclusions. In terms of distance learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the interview had to be conducted asynchronously. The most comfortable platform for both the teachers and researchers was Viber. The teachers had no time limits and could answer the questions whenever they felt comfortable and ready to do it. The learners' contribution into group projects was investigated through peer-evaluation. It was conducted after the presentation of the projects. According to the main features of the theory of Collaborative Learning, students have to be accountable to one another and be able to assess not only their own individual but also other group members'

performance (Kadhom Faroun, 2020). The members of the same group had to evaluate their colleagues' contribution into the project and the leader of the group reported the results to the researcher (student teacher) as the monitor of the activity. The purpose here was to give an evaluation of the participation of each member of each group from the group members' point of view, as only they knew all the insights from their collaboration. Before conducting the group activity, the researcher explained the reasons for using the tool, so all the learners were fully aware that their peers would evaluate them. However, she also told them that their grades would not depend on this evaluation only.   The purpose of the research tools was to give an overall evaluation of the situation with arranging group work activities in Grade 8 b, and the multiple ways of studying and presenting the information would add reliability and validity to such study. All the research tools maintained anonymity and no real names were used in the study. In this way, the participants in our research were fully protected and had confidence that we would not misuse the information provided by them.

4.   RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

According to the theory of Social Interdependence, three major factors influence the process of cooperation during group work. They consist of motivational, social, and cognitive aspects (Chang & Brickman, 2018). We can check the effect of these factors on the target group of learners through their responses to the items of the questionnaire (see Appendix A), which results are demonstrated in Table 1 below. Thus, the first item shows whether the learners' participation in group activity depends on the group members. 88.9% of respondents state that sometimes their participation may be altered by their group-colleagues, while 11.1% mention that their group work never depends on the group members. It is important to note that none of the students chooses the option always. The second item aims at identifying whether group work activities affect the learners relationships. Even though in activities the whole group has a common goal, there may be different opinions or ideas, which leads to conflicts between the group members (Ekblaw, 2016). So, the responses show that more than half of the students (59.3%) sometimes face conflicts during group activities. 33.3% of respondents never experience conflicts in such activities and in contrast to them, 7.4% always see the problem of conflicts between the group members. The third item helps us to determine whether all the learners in the target group feel comfortable expressing their opinion while in small groups. More than half of the students, which is 55.6%, always feel comfortable to put forward their ideas. 40.7% sometimes have difficulty expressing themselves in groups; one respondent (3.7%) always faces this problem. Following the previous statement, item 4 examines whether each suggested idea or opinion is considered by the other group members. According to the results, above half of the learners (51,9%) claim that it happens sometimes. 44.4% of respondents always take into account all the opinions during group activities and only one respondent (3.7%) believes that all of them are never taken into account. The fifth item focuses on the problem of individual academic performance, i.e. if the learners have worries about their grades depending on the work of their group-colleagues. Accordingly, 51.9% of the respondents state that they never see it as a problem. On the other hand, 37% sometimes worry about this issue, while 11.1% always do it. Considering the fact that some students are worried about their grades, the sixth item aims at finding out if they consider it to be fair when all the members of the group get the same mark not taking into account their contribution into the work. The majority of learners (66.7%) feel that it is always fair to give all the members the same mark, while 33.3% have doubts and choose the option sometimes. None of the students chooses the variant never. In order to learn whether it is good to form homogeneous or heterogeneous groups in the target group of learners, we ask them whether they feel stronger (in item 7) and weaker (in item 8) than their group-colleagues. The results show

that almost 41% of respondents claim that they never feel stronger than other group members do. 37% choose the option sometimes and more than 22% – always. Contradictory, the overwhelming majority of students (96.3%) never feel weaker than other members of their groups. Only one respondent (3.7%) sometimes sees that he/she is weaker than the others are. Item 9 checks whether there are many learners with leadership qualities in this group. 55.6% of respondents claim that they sometimes lead in the group; 25.9% always take matters into their own hands and try to do everything themselves, and 18.5% never take the initiative to do everything themselves. Contrary to the previous statement, item 10 seeks to determine how many students are able to do less than their group-colleagues if they feel that the others are able to cope with the task without them. The results show that the majority of learners (85.2%) never put all the work on their group-colleagues. The options always and sometimes are chosen by 7.4% of the respondents each.

Tab. 1

Results of the student survey (number of students/%)

Item	Students' answers		
	Always	Sometimes	Never
1. My participation in group work depends on the members of my group.	24/88.9	3/11.1	-
2. Group work tasks impact my relationship with the classmates.	2/7.4	16/59.3	9/33.3
3. I feel comfortable expressing my opinion in a group.	15/55.6	11/40.7	1/3.7
4. Each suggested idea is taken into account.	12/44.4	14/51.9	1/3.7
5. I am worried that my grade depends on the work of others.	3/11.1	10/37	14/51.9
6. It is fair that every group member gets the same mark.	18/66.7	9/33.3	-
7. I feel stronger than other group members.	6/22.2	10/37	11/40.7
8. I feel weaker than other group members.	-	1/3.7	
9. I try to control everything and do all the work myself.	7/25.9	15/55.6	5/18.5
10. I make less effort because I am sure that other group members will do the work.	2/7.4	2/7.4	23/85.2

Source: Our own

The learners' responses to the last open-ended question, *"How do you feel about group work? What do you like most and least about working in groups?"* show that learners share the idea that this mode of interaction is very interesting and interactive (e.g. *"When you work in a group it is more interesting to work than when you are alone"*, *"It's cool and interactive. Speaking and doing something with others"*, *"I feel good"*, *"We communicate with each other and I like it the most"*, *"I like group work because we do the project together."* They like listening to their group-colleagues' ideas, as well as expressing their own ones (e.g. *"I like share ideas"*, *"I listen to their opinion and they listen to me"*, *"I like that everyone is bringing their own ideas and the project becomes more interesting"*). Some respondents also find it easier to work with others than alone (e.g. *"It's much easier to work with group than alone"*, *"In group work I like that everyone does equally"*). Another common opinion is that the worst aspect of group work is when somebody does nothing (e.g. *"There is something that I don't like. It's when one person in the group is doing nothing for the project"*, *"I don't like when someone doesn't want to do anything"*, *"I don't like that some classmates don't do anything"*). Thus, the responses to the open-ended question of the questionnaire once again prove the urgency of the problem of unequal participation during group work activities in the target group of learners. Based on the results from the student questionnaire we can state that more than half of the learners of Grade 8 b are sometimes dependent on other members of their group and group activities affect their relationships. However, almost all of the learners feel comfortable expressing their opinion in groups and believe that each idea is taken into account. Considering this, we may put forward the idea that such psychological factor as anxiety to speak in group activities is not that significant in

the target group of learners. However, personal factors such as friendship and relationships between the members of the group are quite influential. We also believe that the target group of students has no problem with another psychological factor, self-confidence, because twenty-six out of twenty-seven learners never feel weaker than their group members do. Another factor that, as we suppose, can influence equal participation in group activities is academic performance. The results of questions 5 and 6 (see Tab. 1) prove that almost half of the learners of Grade 8 b get worried sometimes or always when their grade depends on their group-colleagues, while more than half believes that it is fair to give each member the same mark. To us, this result seems quite controversial.

Teacher interview presents responses of three teachers of English of the Lyceum #11 of the Ivano-Frankivsk City Council to the questions considering the three factors of arranging group work: the ways of forming groups, the number of students in groups and groups' assessment. Here, we outline the main ideas expressed by each teacher about group work arrangement. The full script of the interview is presented in Appendix B. The first question of the interview is: *"How groups are formed? Is it a good idea to give learners a chance to form groups themselves?"* Teacher 1 thinks that students' forming groups may be problematic: *"...I prefer to group them myself as it is less problematic and time-consuming."* Teacher 2 shares her opinion*: "I don't think that learners' forming groups themselves is a good idea."* Teacher 3 has similar opinion: *"...you can try giving your learners a chance to form the groups themselves but it may be rather difficult."* They also provide several reasons to justify their point of view. In particular, Teacher 1 thinks that it is time-consuming and may cause conflicts between the learners. Such groups are formed according to the learners' relationships. Teacher 3 has a similar view and suggests that we risk students who do not have friends in the class being excluded. Moreover, Teachers 2 and 3 say that such groups will be of the same abilities, which means they will be homogeneous, and in our research, we aim at creating heterogeneous ones. In addition, the questionnaire's results illustrate that the learners tend to work in heterogeneous groups as their opinions about feeling stronger than other group members is diverse (see Table 1). The second question concerns the number of students in each group: *"What is the best number of students in a group?"* Teacher 1 claims, *"The number of students in a group depends on the task."* Teacher 2 has a constant number of group members: *"I usually split them into groups of 3-4."* Teacher 3 identifies the best number of students in group for her: *"The most comfortable number of students in a group for me is 4."* As we can see, there is no unanimous answer here. All of the teachers explain their opinions (see Appendix B). In particular, Teacher 1 advises to take into consideration the amount of work to be done and based on that to form groups from three to five members each. Teacher 2 suggests creating groups of three or four members, while Teacher 3 thinks that the most comfortable number of students in a group is four. However, all the teachers agree that the number of members should not be too big because it may cause some students staying aside; it also should not be too small because the group may fail with the task. The last question in the teacher interview is: *"Are all members of the group given the same grade? If not, how can we take into account the contribution of each member?"* (see Appendix B) The teachers have divided opinions on this point. Teacher 1 prefers to grade group members individually: *"I hardly ever give all the members of a group the same grade."* Teacher 2 believes that "they have a group task and work together, so they all deserve the same mark." Teacher 3 stands somewhere in between: *"If I don't see the learners' cooperation ... I give them the same grade. If they have a group task during the lesson and I can observe it, I can grade them individually."* Thus, we can summarise the teachers' views on how to take into account learners' contribution to the group project. Two out of three teachers tend to evaluate each member's contribution if they have a chance to observe the group work activity, while Teacher 2 believes that each group member deserves the same mark as they have the same goal. Teacher 1 also advises to observe each learner's performance during the presentation of group projects in order to grade them individually. As the researcher does not have this

opportunity because of the work being done outside of the classroom, she decides to use peer-evaluation in order to get to know each member's contribution, as well as to monitor the activity talking to the leaders of the groups about their progress and each member's performance. Based on the data obtained from the student questionnaire and the teacher interview, the researcher (student teacher) splits the learners herself taking into account each learner's abilities, forming heterogeneous groups – four groups of five students and two groups of four. We consider it the most appropriate number of learners in a group for the roles prepared for them for completing the project. The results from the items 9 and 10 of the questionnaire (see Tab. 1) show that there are seven learners with strong leadership qualities. In contradiction to this, only four learners are ready to make less effort and stay aside from the work even if their group-colleagues are able to cope without them. Based on these results, we are ensured that the learners are able to assign the roles and split responsibilities themselves. In particular, one member of the group is responsible for making a PowerPoint presentation, the others are resource people who have to find information and pictures, sort them out, and choose appropriate ones. Then they have to divide their presentation into parts and each member has to present some information, so the whole group functions as reporter. The students in the groups themselves have assigned the roles and chosen leaders who contact the researcher and report on their progress periodically. According to the leaders' reports during a week's time, four groups do not need any help at all and manage to cope with the task themselves. However, two groups face a problem of their members' non-participation due to either reluctance to engage in the project work (a learner in Group 3) or an illness (a learner in Group 5). As these groups still have four members, the absence of their fifth member does not influence their work and the final product. The groups present their projects during two online lessons on Zoom. Peer-evaluation is conducted after the presentation of the projects – each group making a list of each member's contribution and the leaders presenting these results to the researcher. According to the peer-evaluation (see Tab. 2), all the members of the groups have contributed to the creation of their projects, except two learners due to the reasons mentioned above. Thus, all the six groups have completed the task according to the requirements – the presentations being informative and attractive, and all the students orienting in the material without much difficulty. The overall assessment is individual, ranging from 10 to 12 points, as the group work has been done successfully.

Tab. 2

Peer-evaluation

Students' Groups	Roles and Responsibilities				
Group 1	Member 1: Leader, made the presentation in PowerPoint and introduction.	Member 2: Searched for information and pictures.	Member 3: Sorted the information.	Member 4: Searched for information and pictures.	
Group 2	Member 1: Leader; sorted the information.	Member 2: Made the presentation in PowerPoint.	Member 3: Searched for information and pictures.	Member 4: Searched for information.	
Group 3	Member 1: Leader; made the presentation in PowerPoint.	Member 2: Searched for information and sorted it.	Member 3: Searched for information and sorted it.	Member 4: Searched for pictures.	Member 5: Refused to take part in the project.
Group 4	Member 1:	Member 2:	Member 3:	Member 4:	Member 5:

	Leader, worked on the presentation.	Searched for information.	Searched for information and pictures.	Sorted the information.	Sorted the pictures.
Group 5	Member 1: Leader; structured the presentation.	Member 2: Made the presentation in PowerPoint.	Member 3: Searched for information and pictures.	Member 4: Sorted the information and pictures.	Member 5: Did not participate because of illness.
Group 6	Member 1: Leader; designed the presentation in PowerPoint.	Member 2: Searched for information and sorted it.	Member 3: Searched for pictures and sorted them.	Member 4: Searched for information.	Member 5: Prepared the text of the presentation.

Source: Our own

5. CONCLUSIONS

In this study, we tried to find an answer to the research question "How can teacher encourage students' equal participation in group work?" We studied a number of scientific works on this problem, developed the method for its research, which was implemented through distance (synchronous and asynchronous) mode of learning of the EFL Grade eight students of a secondary school. For the effective implementation of the research plan, we used such research tools as questionnaire, teacher interview and peer evaluation. The analyses of the pedagogical and psychological literature on the group work of students during the educational process helped us to determine the main factors affecting the equality of participation of students in group work, such as psychological, group formation, monitoring and evaluation. It was found that not all of these factors had influence on the target group of students. According to the research results, the students of Grade 8 b did not suffer from fear of speaking in groups and low self-confidence. Considering this, the group work was organized with an emphasis on the other factors. The groups were heterogeneous and teacher-formed. Each group consisted of four to five members who had their own roles and responsibilities. Direct collaboration with group leaders using the Viber technology made it possible to monitor the progress of project completion in small groups, identify problems and deal with them as soon as they appeared. Using social online communication throughout the project proved to be effective in terms of increased interaction and cooperation in the target group of students, which is also supported by the results of the recent study conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic by Alia (2022, p. 661). The participation of all students in the presentation of the final product allowed us to draw conclusions about the personal contribution of each student to the work of his/her group, while peer evaluation complemented their objectivity. The results of our research made it possible to conclude that the designed method of organizing group work has a great influence on the success of the latter. The correct identification of the main factors affecting a specific group of students, their consideration during the organization and implementation of project work, building on the individual abilities and needs of students are the key to equal participation in group activities. So, the hypothesis of our research is confirmed.

It is important to note the role of Collaborative Learning Theory in our research. Therefore, we recommend to further study its influence on the equality of participation of students in group work. Since the proposed method of organizing work in groups was tested during distance learning, in particular online with the help of information technologies, we propose to investigate its effectiveness also during in-person classroom work. During the research, we encountered the problem of a student's reluctance to participate in the planned project work. Therefore, we

consider it expedient to study also the "Theory of Engagement" (Kearsley & Shneiderman, 1998), investigating ways of motivating students to participate in group work and other types of educational activities in English lessons, in particular with the use of ICT.

Our recommendations to the teacher regarding the practical implementation of the developed method for ensuring equal participation of EFL students during group work are as follows:

• First, conduct a survey among the target group of learners in order to determine the factors influencing the participation in group work of each student

• Since the results of the survey can be diverse, groups should be formed taking into account the factors that affect the majority of students

• In addition to the data from the survey, you should rely on your knowledge of students, their capabilities, strengths and weaknesses

• Allow your students to assign roles and specific work of each member, as this creates responsibility for the success of the whole group, motivates each learner to work better to achieve a common goal

• Although the performance of the task in the group is independent, you should monitor the process, maintain feedback with a group leader (including using social networks), provide assistance if necessary, which will contribute to the improvement of the final result

• Students should be given the opportunity to analyze the work of the group and give their own assessment of the contribution of each of its members. Thus, they will understand how they achieved such a result, what had a good impact on it, and what was less effective.

Our generalizations of the reviewed theoretical sources, our own conclusions and practical recommendations, which arise from this study and form the basis of the proposed method for ensuring equal participation of students during group work in English lessons, can also be used by teachers of other subjects in institutions of general secondary and, after certain modification, tertiary education, regardless of the ownership forms and subordination.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A. Questionnaire for Students

The aim of this questionnaire is to identify the main reasons for unequal participation in group work. The questionnaire is anonymous. You do not have to indicate your name. Choose the variant that is true of you.

1. My participation in group work depends on the members of my group (if I like them or not).

o Never

o Sometimes

o Always

2. Group work tasks impact my relationships with the classmates (we have conflicts, argue because of different opinions).

o Never

o Sometimes

o Always

3. I feel comfortable expressing my opinion in a group.

o Never

o Sometimes

o Always

4. Each suggested idea and opinion is taken into account.

o Never

o Sometimes

o Always

5. I am worried that my grade depends on the work of others.

o Never

o Sometimes

o Always

6. It is fair that every group member gets the same mark.

o Never

o Sometimes

o Always

7. I feel stronger than other group members do.

o Never

o Sometimes

o Always

8. I feel weaker than other group members do.

o Never

o Sometimes

o Always

9. I try to control everything and do all the work myself.

o Never

o Sometimes

o Always

10. I make less effort because I am sure that other group members will do the work.

o Never

o Sometimes

o Always

11. How do you feel about group work? What do you like most and least about working in groups? Provide your answer in the lines below. You can use as much space as needed.

_____

_____

Appendix B. Teacher Interview Script

Researcher: Good afternoon, we are conducting an action research on the topic "The method for ensuring equal participation of EFL students during group work" and we would appreciate if you could answer a few questions concerning group work arrangement.

1. How are groups formed? Is it a good idea to give learners a chance to form groups themselves?

2. What is the best number of students in a group?

3. Are all members of the group given the same grade? If not, how can I take into account the contribution of each member?

We are sincerely grateful for your help and contribution to our research!

Teacher 1: Good afternoon! I will be happy to help you with your research. Concerning group formation strategies, I prefer to group them myself, as it is less problematic and time-consuming. Giving the learners a chance to form groups you have to take into account that it will take a lot of time. You also risk problems with one or several students being excluded from all the groups and therefore conflicts between the learners. Forming groups themselves, they will rely on their relationships. The number of students in a group depends on the task. Take into account the amount of work to be done. The group should not be too big because some students may do nothing as others can cope without them. But it shouldn't be too small to prevent groups from failing. I would recommend forming groups from 3 to 5 students in each, considering the task. I hardly ever give all the members of a group the same grade. It happens only if the task is completed out of class and only one member of the group presents the result. In other cases, I assess each member individually during the presentation of group task. You can easily see who knows the material and who doesn't orient that well. If you have other questions feel free to contact me.

Teacher 2: Good afternoon. I usually form groups according to their sitting arrangement if it's an in-class activity. For out-of-class activities, I form them according to the register. I don't think that learners' forming groups themselves is a good idea. It may cause conflicts and groups of different abilities. I mean that stronger learners will gather in one group and weaker in another. If you have the same task for all the groups, it will cause problems, as a stronger group will complete the task while a weaker one will probably struggle. I usually split them into groups of 3-4 learners. It is easy to control and there are fewer chances that somebody will do nothing. As for assessment, I tend to give the same grade to each member. As they have a group task and work together, they all deserve the same mark.

Teacher 3: Good afternoon! Well, of course, you can try giving your learners a chance to form the groups themselves, but it may be rather difficult. You may face many problems. First, they will probably rely on their friendship and personal relationships. If you have learners who do not have friends in class, they will be left out. You'll also get the groups with the same abilities, the groups of stronger and weaker learners. I prefer grouping them myself according to my observations and knowledge of each learner's abilities. The most comfortable number of students in a group for me is 4. It is neither too big nor too small. All the members in such groups will have work to do and the task will be difficult to complete without each member's participation. If I don't see the learners' cooperation but only the result, for example when they do project at home, I give them the same grade. If they have a group task during the lesson and I can observe it, I can grade them individually. Hope, I helped you with your research!

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Ця праця є маломасштабним практичним дослідженням проблеми участі учнів, які вивчають англійську мову як іноземну, у груповій роботі під час кризи пандемії COVID-19. Основні етапи дослідження проводились у 2020/21 навчальному році. У дослідженні взяли участь двадцять вісім українських учнів середньої школи та троє вчителів англійської мови. Дослідження спрямоване на розробку методики забезпечення залученості та рівного внеску учнів у груповий проєкт під час дистанційного навчання. Методологічною основою цього дослідження є теорії «Модель готовності до спілкування», «Навчання у співпраці» та «Соціальна взаємозалежність». Кількісні та якісні емпіричні дані були зібрані за допомогою змішаного методу, зокрема за допомогою методів педагогічного спостереження, опитування (інтерв'ю з учителями та анкетування учнів), взаємооцінки та математичної статистики (описовий і частотний методи). Аналіз науково-педагогічної та психологічної літератури щодо залучення студентів під час традиційного (очного) та дистанційного (синхронного та асинхронного) навчання, у тому числі з використанням соціальних мереж (Viber, Zoom тощо), допоміг визначити основні фактори, що впливають на залученість учнів та їх рівну участь у груповій діяльності, такі як психологічні (впевненість у собі, тривожність, сором'язливість та особистість), формування групи (розмір групи, сформована вчителем/учнями, однорідна/різнорідна), вид контролю (самоконтроль, контроль з боку однолітків і вчителя) та оцінювання (однолітками і вчителем). Результати дослідження демонструють, що вчитель має великий вплив на успішність і рівність участі студентів у діяльності малих груп. Виявлення причин нерівної участі в цільовій групі учнів, врахування особистісних рис і потреб учнів, а також використання відповідних стратегій планування, організації та моніторингу є ключем до їх активного залучення та ефективної групової роботи. Результати цього дослідження можуть бути використані дослідниками та практиками, які працюють у секторах середньої та вищої освіти.

Ключові слова: групова робота, проєктна робота, участь студентів, дистанційне навчання, клас із вивчення англійської мови як іноземної, навчання/викладання під час пандемії COVID-19.