The effects of Vietnamese students' perception of hierarchy on group work interaction and satisfaction

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A B S T R A C T

Group work is widely acknowledged as a valuable learning activity, but its appropriateness in the Vietnamese context has been questioned. Concerned by the imposition of Western pedagogy, researchers have sought to accommodate Vietnamese students' preferences to produce culturally appropriate means of implementing group work. Such preferences include working in a group with a leader and working with people who think similarly; these, however, go against the principles of effective group work. We argue that stated preferences are not necessarily clear reflections of actual practice, and are therefore not sufficient to determine successful alternatives. In this study, three sources of data are compared: Vietnamese students' preferences as expressed in focus group interviews; their interaction in a creative group task; and their commentary on their behaviour as they watch the recording of the group task in individual retrospective interviews. The triangulation of the three sources reveals a tension between an unquestioned belief in the necessity of hierarchical social relations and dissatisfaction with the effects of hierarchy on group interaction. The findings shed further light on the complex dynamics of Vietnamese group work with implications for the elaboration of alternative pedagogies.

1. Background: group work in Vietnamese education

Group work is widely acknowledged as a valuable pedagogical activity in English language learning (Richards, 2005; Willis & Willis, 2007) and more generally (Johnson & Johnson, 2013). Group work can help increase learning opportunities, motivation and students' social skills (Dörnyei, 1997; Poupore, 2016). It does not, however, automatically lead to these outcomes, which depend on group dynamics based on positive interdependence, individual accountability, and productive interaction (Johnson & Johnson, 2013; Poupore, 2016). It is therefore important to understand the context in which group work takes place.

The promotion of group work in the language classroom accompanied the rise of communicative language teaching in Asia in the 1990s. These methods have, however, sometimes been seen as an imported Western pedagogical approach (Ellis, 1996), with calls for more culturally responsive methods in Asian contexts (Lewis & McCook, 2002; McKay, 2003). The few studies of group work in the Vietnamese educational context investigate student preferences and ways to implement culturally appropriate forms of group work. To explore how learners in Vietnam can contribute to ELT methodology, Tomlinson and Dat (2004) found that most Vietnamese students surveyed preferred working in open and communicative groups and wished to have deeper social relations through group activities. Nguyen, Terlouw, and Pilot (2012) found that all the student groups they surveyed showed a consistent preference for

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collaborative learning. These studies showed positive attitudes towards group work among Vietnamese students, but did not investigate group work dynamics or outcomes.

Other studies provide a more nuanced picture, by comparing attitudes to and the learning outcomes of different kinds of groups. Searching for a culturally appropriate pedagogy in applying cooperative learning principles, Nguyen (2008) compared the work of groups of close friends, groups with an appointed leader, and randomly constituted groups of classmates. Although the students working in the first two types of group reported that they exerted more effort in learning, the learning outcomes of the group work were not found to be superior to those of the third type. She then proposed nine principles in applying cooperative learning in Vietnam including having a mechanism for appointing a group leader, grouping based on social relationships, and rewarding equality. While calling these "principles," Nguyen cautioned that they should be understood as tentative suggestions.

Pham (2014) also aimed to build a more culturally relevant cooperative learning framework for Vietnamese students. She looked at the disjunctions between the cooperative learning principles of the West and Vietnamese students' attitudes based on survey and interview data. Students in her study showed negative attitudes towards mixed ability groups. Valuing harmony, they preferred to work in groups with their friends and with a leader. Adjusting the principles of cooperative learning to suit these preferences, Pham developed a cooperative learning framework in which students were assigned to work with friends of similar ability and a leader. Pham found that by using this framework, students' enjoyment of the group process and interactive performance significantly improved. She cautioned, however, that it ran the risk of hindering students from developing new knowledge: grouping friends with similar perspectives limited their ability to produce new ideas. Aiming to maintain harmony can even prevent students from benefiting from diversity because avoidance may be chosen in the case of a conflict of ideas. Appointing a group leader to maintain group harmony might not bring about the intended effect as a hierarchical leader may suppress ideas from group members rather than appreciating them. Seeing these constraints, Pham (2014) suggested that it would be "ideal" to find ways to apply students' values of friendship, harmony and leadership while limiting their negative impact on the uptake of all available ideas and resources. Pham then left these ideals as a direction for further research.

Both Nguyen (2008) and Pham (2014) based their arguments on intercultural communication literature that emphasises the East-West dichotomy and that assumes Vietnamese culture to be collectivist. Furthermore, they generalised from the literature on other Asian countries, applying the findings to Vietnam because, they argued, these countries share a Confucian heritage. Both Nguyen (2008) and Pham (2014) came to the conclusion that Vietnamese students prefer to work with their closer friends and to have a leader, which improves their attitudes towards the group but not necessarily the outcomes. The changed design based on student preferences and the comparison between generalised literature may form a good starting point for group work organisation and application in learning. However, such organisation may not help the students to exploit the advantages that diversity could bring to the group of new members (van Knippenberg, Haslam, & Platow, 2007), and a hierarchical leader may harm creative idea development (Pham, 2014).

Other researchers have investigated how certain interventions work in the Vietnamese context rather than aiming to find culturally appropriate modes of group work. Lê (2004) investigated the interaction patterns in group work among peers (unassisted group) and with a senior assisting student (assisted group) in language classes. She found that the assisted group spoke more English, but in dyadic interaction between the senior and the individual lower proficiency students. Dao and McDonough (2017) explored Vietnamese EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners' collaboration in mixed proficiency dyads by assigning differing roles in story telling tasks to students of different proficiency levels. They found that when assigning the role of information holder to the lower proficiency learners, the learners engaged more in language related episodes, where they "talk about the language they are producing, question their language use, or correct themselves and others" (Swain & Lapkin, 1998, p. 326), and more mutual interaction. In a design-based study, Pham and Renshaw (2015) found that students reported working more effectively and equally in a friendship group with a leader they appointed than in mixed ability groups with rotation of the role of leader. Although neither Lê (2004) nor Dao and McDonough (2017) were seeking a culturally appropriate method for effective group work interaction among Vietnamese, they both proposed group scenarios involving a hierarchy of language competence. The studies by Nguyen (2008, 2018), Pham (2014) and Pham and Renshaw (2015) also suggested leadership style or hierarchy as an important factor to consider when trying to respond to students' group work preferences.

In this study, we argue that stated preferences are not sufficient to understand the complex dynamics of Vietnamese group work. A more comprehensive and detailed understanding of the interactions among students in the group and the relationship between their attitudes and behaviours is essential to address the problems that Pham identified. If we can understand the value and dynamics of the students' group work interaction, we may find a better alternative that can help students to go beyond that starting point to appreciate and take advantage of the potential diversity the new group members can bring about and possibly deal with the disadvantages that hierarchical leaders can pose. This study looks at how hierarchy is perceived in students' creative group work in an EFL classroom and the effects of this perception on group interaction and group work satisfaction. This understanding will form a stronger basis for creating culturally appropriate team work principles than the participants' statements of preferences and generic characterisations of regional or national cultures.

2. Hierarchy and diversity in team/group work

Based on insights from cross-cultural comparison and neuroscience, Nguyen (2018) proposes that hierarchy is an important

element in leadership and group interaction, which goes against the principle of participatory leadership proposed by mainstream collaborative studies in the West (e.g.: Johnson & Johnson, 2013; West, 2012). Similarly, Nguyen (2008, 2018), Pham (2014) and Pham and Renshaw (2015) consider the students' preference for having a leader. Aware of the effects of a leader on the effectiveness of group work, Pham cautioned that though having a leader may satisfy the preference of the students, it may hinder idea development in group work. This is because such a preference goes against the principles of effective group work: group members tend to agree with the opinions of hierarchically senior members of the group irrespective of the quality of those ideas (West, 2012). In this way, power indirectly hinders the group's consideration of all possible perspectives and alternatives. Power differences tend to produce negative effects on the group process because the high status members tend to self-enhance their value while devaluing lower-status members (Johnson & Johnson, 2013). In response, the latter may experience resistance and dissatisfaction (Johnson & Johnson, 2013). Hierarchy tends to have negative effects on group creativity and decision-making, especially when the task is complex (West, 2012). Power and status differences in the group are found to produce hostile interaction patterns (De Dreu, 1995), which hinder creativity and innovation (Johnson & Johnson, 2013; West, 2012). Kramer and Crespy (2011), on the other hand, find that where leaders promote co-constructed leadership, work to minimise power differences, and empower group members with authority and decision-making responsibility, the result is collaboration that facilitates creativity, equal participation and group members' satisfaction.

Other forms of difference, differences in competences, for example, on the other hand, are found to have positive effects on group work collaboration and creativity. There is a consensus in the literature on the importance and the positive effects of group diversity on the quantity and quality of ideas generated, and the quality of group decision-making. However, although diversity brings advantages to group work, it may also bring about negative effects on group cohesion, commitment and affective responses (Williams & O'Reilly, 1998) if not properly handled. However, van Knippenberg et al. (2007) find that when group members believe in the value of diversity of competences and even demographic diversity, group satisfaction or positive affective outcomes can surpass those achieved by a homogeneous group. The value of diversity and the power dynamics in group interaction are compared in the analysis of participants' interactions, perspectives and values in this study to shed light on such effects.

3. Methodology and data

To understand group dynamics, interactions among Vietnamese learners of English were recorded and analysed, and interviews and focus groups were conducted. The participants comprised 51 language students aged 17–26, majoring in various fields, studying English in a language learning centre in Hanoi. Their proficiency ranged from intermediate to advanced. They were attending an IELTS training course using materials selected from a variety of sources by a teacher with an MA-TESOL degree. All the students had extensive experience of groupwork during their university studies (group project work) and English language classes (pairwork, brainstorming, group writing activities). The students had known each other and worked together for between two months and two years. The group members self-selected their group partners.

Data were collected from multiple sources and triangulated. First, 13 groups of students were video-recorded working together for 45 min on a collaborative task of creating an advertisement for a product of their choice. Students were asked to imagine they were colleagues working together to design a product or service and then create an advertisement for that product including a logo and slogan. To see how students perceived the interaction, retrospective interviews were conducted: each student was invited to watch the video recording of their group task and comment on the recording within two days after the group task, and their individual commentary was audio-recorded. 42 students were available to participate in these retrospective interviews, which explored what students were thinking at the time of the main task interaction (MTI), how they perceived their partners' ideas, actions and responses, and how their partners' responses and action influenced their participation and contributions to the interaction (see Appendix A). Each interview lasted 50–60 min.

To compare their behaviour, thoughts about their behaviour and general perceptions of expected behaviour in the group task, four one-hour focus group interviews were conducted 3–4 days later. These did not focus on the MTI, but explored the students' general perceptions of group interaction in all educational contexts. The students were asked to discuss what makes group work successful and their experience of successful and unsuccessful group work (see Appendix B).

The group task interaction was in English and transcribed following Conversational Analysis conventions (ten Have, 2007). The retrospective interviews were in Vietnamese, with frequent code switching to English, and were transcribed verbatim, with comments

Table 1
Summary of the data.

Data form	Language	Number of groups	Number of participants	Length of each in minutes
Group interaction	English	13	51	45
Retrospective interview	Vietnamese	Individual	42	30–60
Focus group interview	Vietnamese	4	22	Over 60

Table 2

Frequency of comments related to hierarchy.

Data	Total no. of groups	Total no. of participants	No of participants who make comments related to hierarchy	No of participants who rank themselves lower	No of participants who rank themselves higher	Total no. of comments related to hierarchy
Retrospective interviews	13	42	22	2	20	87
Focus group interviews	4	22	17	N/A	N/A	98

linked to the relevant sequence in the group task interaction. The focus group interviews were in Vietnamese, with some code switching to English, and were transcribed verbatim (Table 1).

We then conducted thematic qualitative data analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994) of both retrospective interviews and focus group interviews, using a process of open coding to identify, categorize, describe and group themes found in the transcripts. Hierarchy emerged from the interview data as a significant theme even though the questions in both forms of interview did not mention hierarchy. By constant comparison of the data from all three sources against each other and the patterns found with the emerging concept of hierarchy, sub-patterns related to hierarchy emerged. Then comments related to hierarchy in retrospective interviews and focus group interviews were triangulated to the relevant sequences in the group task interaction to see what effects the perception of hierarchy had on the group interaction and on students' satisfaction of group work.

Table 2 summarises the frequency of comments related to hierarchy in retrospective and focus group interviews. Table 3 shows the proportion of the interview data related to hierarchy.

Comments related to hierarchy were made spontaneously by more than half of the retrospective interview participants (coming from ten out of 13 of the MTI groups) and by more than three quarters of the focus group participants (coming from all four focus groups). Discussion of hierarchy accounted for approximately 12% of the data in the retrospective interviews and approximately 20% of the data in focus group interviews without any prompting from the researcher.

4. Data analysis

4.1. Assumption of a hierarchy of competence

Despite the mostly collaborative interaction found in the creative group task interaction across all 13 groups, it was observed that in the retrospective interviews (RI), where students comment on their interaction and in the focus group interviews (FGI) where they discuss their group work experience in general, complaints about group process and dissatisfaction of group work in general are mentioned frequently in 10 out 13 groups. Comments reporting dissatisfaction were grouped and analysed. It was found that students constantly compare and contrast one another's ability and competences in all these 10 groups.

In the FGIs, the difference in competence among group members is commented on with 36 references by 17 out of 22 participants in all four groups. The word *hơn,* meaning "more" is used 39 times to describe differences in the competence of the group members. It is, for example, included in expressions meaning: better, more capable, more effective, more intelligent, faster and worse. The word *giỏi* meaning "good", "capable", or "excellent" is used 40 times, especially in contrasting people of lower and higher ability: for example, "some are more capable, some are weaker" (Yen-FGI1). The word *kém* meaning "weak", "poor" or "low in capability" is used 20 times. Despite frequent comments about a hierarchy of competence, the students rarely specify whether someone is weaker or stronger in a particular domain or in all domains. As the meanings of those words translated above, they can mean capability, effectiveness, intelligence, speed or general quality.

When students use these comparative words, no objections or disagreements from other members of the FGI are heard. Furthermore, they spend a great deal of time discussing the effects of and solutions to the hierarchy of competence. In three cases, differences in abilities are commented on but in relation to more general ideas of ranking. In FGI1, Hoang mentions this several times:

> [...] the leader needs to see whether each person has any special ability in each domain, [...] the weaker ones tend to be quiet, [...] when a person is not very quick, we can choose a suitable task for them, for example in my group, I asked two people to just hold the scissors and tapes, which are very small tasks, [...] the more capable ones usually try to show off and look down on the weaker ones, but they don't understand that those small and secondary tasks also make an important contribution to the group.

(Hoang[1]-FGI1[2])

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[1] All names are pseudonyms.
[2] Quote taken from focus group interview 3.

Table 3

Proportion of interview data related to hierarchy.

Data	Retrospective interviews		Focus group interviews	
	No of groups	No of words	No of groups	No of words
Related to hierarchy	10	9746	4	11,364
Total	13	82,754	4	55,962

In Hoang's comments, the diversity of competence is mentioned first as "special ability in each domain". However, when specifying the differences, he ranks the group members as more capable and the weaker, and ranks the tasks or the weaker members as "small" and "secondary", creating a hierarchy of competence. The diversity of ability in each domain is seen as a hierarchy rather than the various competences. Khai (FGI3) also mentions the diversity of abilities as an advantage of group work:

> With one problem, each person has a different viewpoint, different levels of competence, different knowledge, different hobbies, the problem can be dealt with more objectively from different perspectives […]. An example of different knowledge can be seen in that those with college degrees may have different awareness while those without that advantage have more limited awareness.
>
> (Khai-FGI3)

Khai comments about diversity in a wide range of aspects, and the fact that those differences can make complementary contributions to the group work. However, when giving an example of those differences, he compares the knowledge of those with a college degree with "more limited awareness" among those without. His idea of diversity here is just another expression of hierarchy. Minh (FGI3) also mentions the differences in skills and competences:

> Each person has a different skill, a different working ability. In group work, one's skill is quick, another's skill is weaker, which inhibits the process rather than supplements it […]. In a group, one person likes one thing, another likes another, complementing in, which can make the group go off-track and hinder the process.
>
> (Minh-FGI3)

When Minh talks about the difference in skills and abilities, he specifies it by describing skills as "quick", or "weaker", which again equates to a hierarchy, rather than an appreciation of diversity. He also sees this difference as a hindrance to the group work process rather than complementary. Hoang, Khai and Minh's comments suggest that they do not see differences as strengths, as a diversity of competence that the group can make use of. They claim to value diversity, but the differences they cite are merely used to rank abilities.

The ranking of competence is logically seen in the ranking of organisational power in group work, in the position of the leader. In the FGIs, when asked to comment on their perceptions, viewpoints and experience of working in group, almost all students start with the topic of leadership. There is no evidence of students' acknowledgement of the existence of other kinds of group work organisation in which the position of leader is not essential. One student even emphasises: "whatever there is, there must be a leader in a group" (Minh-FGI3), and this idea is explicitly agreed on by two other participants (Hiep and Le). There is no evidence found in the FGI data that show students' disagreement with the perception that a leader is indispensible in the group. However, Minh further comments that in his real life work experience "it's very easy to work without our boss because the people with better capability can force others to follow, which is normal" (Minh-FGI3). Here he seems to contradict his earlier statement that there must be a leader in a group. However, he accepts the idea that in a group without a boss, it is natural for the most capable one to take control. In this case, he still supports the perception that there must be a leader in a group, and the leader is the one who is more capable. In general, that a leader is essential for the group to function properly is an unquestioned assumption among students.

Even when suggesting what to do to improve the current situation of group work, which they see as problematic, students propose solutions that enhance rather than reduce the importance of hierarchy. For example, those who perceive themselves as more competent think that if they had chance to do the task again, they would be more dominant and more controlling. For instance, Hue-D thinks that "If I continue to work with this group, I will train them my way". Similarly, Manh-D says: "I will be more assertive and more determined, so that our product can be developed in the right direction" (Manh-RID[3]). Tuyet-I asserts that "If I were calmer, I would direct the group better and I would be in better control of the group process" (Tuyet-RII). In discussing how to deal with the hierarchy of competence, unequal contribution and responsibility, students further suggest that a leader should express equal respect for all ideas (Hoang-FGI1), and should "encourage instead of criticising" (Hoang-FGI1). The leader should "talk later rather than talk first" (Hiep, Le-FGI3) because when the leader talks first, others usually do not move away from that direction, which can limit idea contribution and development.

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[3] Quotes taken from retrospective interview group D.

Suggestions not necessarily involving leaders include: "listening and respecting others' ideas" instead of everyone thinking their ideas are the best (Hoa-FGI1), which is not discussed further in the FGI and which is not practiced by Hoa-C herself, who talks most of the time in the main task interaction. In addition, Hoa-C sees greater contribution of work by the more capable members of the group as a sacrifice that should be encouraged. Hue (FGI1) suggests that instead of sacrifice and doing the task for the "less competent", the more capable members should help the less capable to learn to do the task by themselves. The idea that the less capable ones should do the easier tasks (by Hoa and Hoang-FGI1) is also discussed again in FGI4, where students think they should take turns doing difficult tasks, and take turns being the leaders because it involves different skills students should learn to improve themselves and because "challenges help people improve themselves" (May-FGI4).

Students' suggestions on how to deal with differences in competence and unequal contribution reveal their understanding of the disadvantages of the hierarchy of competence itself. When students look to the leaders to solve problems, the responsibility of dealing with the hierarchy is again hierarchical. The ideas of helping one another in difficulties, either taking charge of the task for others as a sacrifice (by Hoa−C) or making other capable of doing the task by themselves (by Hue-FGI1) show students' willingness to help and collaborative attitudes towards the group task and towards assisting other members. However, that assistance and sacrifice can be a form of controlling and forcing others to do the task the way the "more capable" members want and a form of disempowering those considered less competent rather than empowering them. With the underlying perception that one is more capable than the others, the assistance of the more "capable members" may not effectively tap into the different resources that different members bring to the group.

In summary, when discussing competences, students do not see diversity in terms of different abilities and competences but rank differences as lower or higher in a hierarchy. The ranking may not only apply within one type of competence, but different types of competences are also put on a scale where one type is viewed as more important than another. This corresponds to their view of the way that the group should be organised, whereby the position of the leader and the power associated with that position are essential.

4.2. Perception of leadership and attempts to establish position

Not only do the students perceive the competence of group members in a hierarchy, they also try to establish their position in the hierarchy. Examples of students more explicitly wishing to assume the position of leader include[4]:

> It was a pity. After the discussion, I found that my language competence was not sufficient to put myself in the leader's position to make decisions, leaving the two others specialising in languages to discuss too much. That was such a regret.
>
> (Minh-219RIJ)

> If working with this group again, I would train other members to follow my direction.
>
> (Hue-RID)

> If I were a leader of this discussion, I would make people focus on the main directions… I would not let the time be wasted that way, … people talk endlessly about unfeasible ideas… I would directly tell this guy 'hey, shut up to let him finish his turn first, why are you interrupting?'
>
> (Xuan-RIF)

The above comments suggest that these students think that their ideas and their way of working are better than those of their peers, that their form of competence is more important, and that if they were in the leader position, the group work in the main task would have been more successful. Here, leadership is not just seen as associated with power and control, but also with competence. The students attempt to establish their position in the hierarchy, especially as a leader, by appealing to their particular competence. In the following, each appeals to certain aspect of their competence that theirs is stronger than others' to argue for their "qualification" to assume the leader position.

The idea that people's capability is hierarchical is explicitly expressed and acknowledged by both the participants who consider themselves to be of higher capability "when one's ability is just a little bit weaker, it is fine, but when one's ability is clearly different, a report on the group process is important for individual assessment" (May-RI1P); and also by the ones who see themselves as less capable: "While the leader can be more capable, the ordinary ones should be given space to talk when they want to" (Hoai-527RIH). Phrases such as "weaker", "more capable", and "ordinary" clearly indicate the ranking of the group members' ability on a certain scale. However, in these cases, the field of ability is not specified. The participants seem to see a person as more capable than another in a more general way.

When referring to the hierarchy of competence, only a small minority of the students either implicitly or explicitly rank themselves lower than their co-participants. Of the 22 participants who gave a total of 87 comments referring to hierarchy during the RIs, only Diep-2P and Hoai-H make four comments referring to their own ability and themselves as "inferior" and "weaker". In Diep's

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[4] This number refers to the corresponding line the student comment on in the MTI.

group, there is space for her to talk, but she cannot make use of it and feels uneasy because she contributes fewer ideas to the group than her co-participants. Hoai-H complains that those of higher ability and fluency do not give her enough space to talk. Two other participants see both superior and inferior qualities in others. Huy-F comments on Long's position as a leader, but also on Long's language incompetence. Bac-H explicitly comments that: "… for example, this guy's English is very good; these two girls already have work experience, being older than me. They may speak English better and seem more confident, but I think they have not been trained in teamwork skills" (Bac-042RIH). Bac explicitly expresses belief in his better group work skills and better ideas due to his knowledge. In this comment, he acknowledges others' higher competence in English and their work experience but specifies that they do not have as much teamwork training and experience as he does. His remark indicates that he is jockeying for a higher ranking and still assumes higher competence relevant to this specific group work situation.

The vast majority (20) of the 22 students who give comments on hierarchy in the RIs either explicitly or implicitly rank themselves higher on the hierarchy. One of the ways in which students establish their hierarchical position in the group is through age and experience, and 13 comments of this kind are made by eight participants. Examples include: "…I'm older than them … and I have real-life experience… They may not have experience in doing this" (Minh-219RIJ); "I strongly disagree because I play with children a lot, I know" (May-RI1P); "I thought they had never seen that before" (Quynh-454RIH), and "…I have more experience, Minh told me afterwards that he had never worked in a group before. I should've told them the plan and direction from the beginning because I had experience…" (Thuy-RIJ). These competitive comments reveal that the students believe that their age and experience make them more knowledgeable and more qualified than other members. Thus, their ideas should be seen as more valid, and they could have led the group process with better results.

Another way students perceive the hierarchy of competence is through the association of idea-generating ability with language competence, including fluency and the amount of talk. For example, Quynh-H refers to Hoai-H: "This person talks so slowly that sometimes when she talks, I only listen to half of what she said. I feel impatient…" (015RIH), and to Hiep-H: "This guy speaks English well and has quite good ideas. I feel that he and I understand each other more than the other two. The other two have little experience related to selling products" (055RIH). We can see the direct association between language competence and perception of the quality of ideas. She clearly indicates a gap between the rank of herself and Hiep, who both have fluent English, and the other two – Hoai and Bac – who she sees as having "little experience". However, the association is not as reliable as she assumes, and she is not convinced by many ideas that Hiep proposes. She even comments "…I was surprised at how silly he was" (Quynh-509RIH). Yet there is no evidence in the whole Retrospective Interview with Quynh that she realises that language competence is not necessarily related to the ability to generate valid ideas.

Lien-J, who says she is usually a leader who dominates the group and does most of the group task when it is in Vietnamese, makes a perceptive comment about the association between the ability to speak fluently and the power of influence, and how fluency leads to a perception of competence:

When people can speak a lot, they will think that they have a better position, and others will pay more attention to them. And I think Tuyet has that thought. I also have that thought; everyone does because the one who speaks more is the one who can attract more attention. It is like that everywhere.

(Lien-RII)

However, unlike Quynh-H, who comments from the position of the more fluent speaker when she associates fluency with quality of ideas, in this example, Lien-I comments from the position of the one who is less fluent and is dominated in the MTI:

But in the teamwork, I think all the ideas in the group should receive attention. If I were in a team and one person did not speak, I would ask that person. […] They may have good ideas because they attentively listen to the whole process. I was frustrated because she didn't pay attention to my ideas and then turned to Khoi to check my comments.

(Lien-636RII)

She thinks that a quiet person can have valid ideas and is frustrated when what she says is not appreciated. She recognises that the association between the amount of talk and the quality of ideas is wrong even though she herself once thought that way, possibly because this time Lien sees it from the position of the one who is dominated. Interestingly, it is in the second language environment that Lien-I, normally a dominating person in her native language, experiences being dominated. The contrast between the two types of experience makes Lien see that linguistically competent people, or dominant speakers, do not necessarily have better ideas.

Besides using age, experience, and language fluency to establish a hierarchy of competence, students also directly and indirectly blame others' incompetence and claim their own competence through belief in their own intellectual superiority. Examples include: "Their understanding is not yet clear enough…" (Quynh-401RIH); "sometimes I feel bored because their ideas are not very creative and are rather 'stupid' [sic]" (Thuy-037RIJ); "they may not have skills, which slows down the speed. Sometimes they go off-track, which needs re-directing" (Tuyet-RII); "I don't know why but they don't seem to have imagination" (Minh-368RIJ); "this project and product are not suitable for them. Just letting them discuss would never come to a result" (Minh-439RIJ); "I think I can draw it

better" (Lien-628RII); and "I think developing ideas related to advertising, if I spoke in Vietnamese, people would follow me more than follow Tuyet. It's not who to follow, but my ideas would be better" (Lien-RII). In the above examples, students do not need to resort to their experience or knowledge, they just use their judgement to evaluate themselves, and they see others as not having clear understanding, not having imagination, having uncreative and "stupid" ideas and not having skills. At the same time, they see themselves as having superior ideas and skills.

In sum, around 50% of the students who participate in the RIs rank people's ability in a hierarchy. They represent nine out of 13 Main Task groups. With the exception of two students who see themselves as lower in rank, the vast majority of these students compete for a higher position in the hierarchy, establishing their ability by virtue of age, experience, language competence or simply and directly through subjective self-evaluation, claiming their own competence and blaming the incompetence of others. In that hierarchy, they are not only more competent with better understanding and ideas, but they also know the direction that the group should follow. Consequently, the group, according to these students, should be hierarchically organised such that there is a leader controlling the group process, assigning who should do what and making the final decision, and they feel that generally, since they are more competent and know in which direction the group should go, they should assume the leader position. The jockeying for position and the competition are constantly seen through the whole Retrospective Interview among those who view themselves higher in rank. Interestingly, in some groups, there is more than one student who claims to be the most capable in the group.

4.3. Effects of the perception of hierarchy

This section explores the effects of the perception of hierarchy by triangulating the conclusions from the analysis of the data in the RIs and FGIs with the data in the MTIs. Interactionally, the perception of a hierarchy of competence influences the participants' moment by moment behaviour decisions. These include not listening, turning to work alone, interrupting, hindering others' participation, giving non-appreciative utterances, and self-censoring their own ideas.

Hiep-H and Minh-J report that they turn to work alone, drawing the outline and designing the poster instead of listening to their co-participants, because their ideas are "not very practical, … and contributing little to the common goal" (Hiep-134RIH) and because "this project and product are not suitable for them. Just letting them discuss would never come to a result" (Minh-439RIJ). Lam-1P also reports not listening to Ha because at that time she thinks that they should draw rather than talking and discussing aimlessly. The ranking of competence in a hierarchy and the thought that their co-participants are not competent in doing the task and that their ideas are of little value make these students stop listening to their co-participants. Their turning to work alone is both observed during the MTI and reported in the RI.

Quynh-H sees herself as a controlling and dominating leader, both in her real life experience and in observing the MTI: "In fact, in my work, […] I'm a sales manager. Whenever I am in a meeting, I control everybody. Everybody has to follow my ideas, which may be the habit that I have in here" (Quynh-037RIH). Observing the video of the group interaction, she seems to realise the effect of her dominating interaction on Hoai's participation and adds: "This person spoke very little … possibly because I spoke too much" (Quynh-037RIH). During the interaction, she interrupts Hoai (lines 108 and 151-MTI) to give non-appreciative comments such as "Yeah, I know" when Hoai expresses her ideas, preventing Hoai from completing her turns. Although such comments can be used as minimal responses expressing the listener's understanding and attention, in this case, Quynh's intonation indicates that what Hoai is saying is not worth listening to. Similarly Hoa-C thinks she is the only one who knows what the group should do. She thus interrupts Lan-C's participation by telling her to stop in the middle of Lan's turn, explaining that there is not enough time left.

Extract 1-MTI

174   Lan   = another [service you can] provide so to arh and I think =

175   Hoa   [yeah yeah I see]

176   Lan   →   =that we first decide the and the the erh the facilities th-[

177   Hoa   →   [so

178   →   ok sorry to interrupt

179   you so first I would like us because we don't have much time

180   so we have to unify for arh certain items first about

181   [customers so   ] do you agree [that everyone   ok]=

182   Lan   [customers yeah]   [yeah I agree everyone]

183   Hoa   = [Thuan]

184   Thuan   [uhm] No I don't [ag- agree]

The dominating behaviour of others and the perception that one's ideas are not respected sometimes make students self-censor their own ideas. For example, Lan-C feel discouraged when Hoa speaks fluently in long turns. Thuan-C also stops himself from trying to express different ideas from Hoa's because his language competence is lower than hers. Although Lan-C is active in the beginning, she withdraws herself almost completely from contributing ideas from line 176 to line 443 in the group process of 558 lines after being interrupted by Hoa many times. In line 182 in the extract above, Lan says in the retrospective interview that she just let Hoa decide and agreed without feeling satisfied with what was going on. Commenting on her silence after receiving a non-appreciative response, Hoai-H says: "We Vietnamese are not so confident. When we find we are inferior to others, we tend to follow others' ideas… The superior should also listen to others' ideas, creating conditions for others to speak" (Hoai-RIH). Hoai sees herself as inferior to other members of the group due to her language level and the way others do not take up her ideas. This discourages her from participating. There is a conflict within her comments between the tendency to follow others and the view that others should listen more and leave opportunities for the weaker to speak. She does not see language competence as necessarily associated with the ability to initiate ideas as her co-participants seem to assume.

It is interesting to examine the comments by Lien-I, who has experience of dominating the group in her professional life but is dominated in this study. From the experience of the role reversal, Lien thinks she now knows what the dominated person would think. She states her opinion in a hypothetical situation using her co-participants' names as examples:

when people follow my ideas, for example, if Le wants to disagree, I will think that she does not know anything, and she hasn't made any contribution yet, or I may ask Khoi, because he speaks more and he knows more. All of that hinders Le's contribution. That attitude of mine would make Le think she doesn't have any position in the group… She then won't speak.

(Lien-RII)

In this hypothetical situation, Lien asserts that the domineering person gets more followers and does not consider the quiet person's ideas worth noticing. When s/he needs to ask for contributions, the group would pay more attention to the ones who speak

more. The quieter ones would then think they do not have any voice in the group and would censor themselves from further contribution.

Lien also realises why the domineering person, who thinks he/she knows more, has to do the group task by him/herself:

usually, I dominate the group. Now I understand why after that I almost always have to do everything ... because others lose interest in the project, they don't want to give ideas because they think that their ideas will be contradicted... I feel displeased and now I realise it is because of me myself.

(Lien-RII)

From Lien-I's experience and perspective, the hierarchy of competence and the dominating behaviour make both the dominating and the dominated think that the dominating and more competent person's ideas are better. The dominating contribution is associated with a higher quality of ideas, and that hinders the contribution of other members. The result of such behaviour and perceptions means one person usually has to do almost the entire group task alone. This finding is also in line with Hoang and Pham's (2019) finding that students tend to leave the language learning task to the most proficient members of the group.

Interactional effects such as not listening, turning to work alone, and self-censoring one's own ideas make participants generally dissatisfied with the group work process. The dissatisfaction is not just perceived by the ones who see themselves as lower in the hierarchy but also by the ones who see themselves as superior. The ones who see themselves as would-be-leaders feel frustrated in a group without a leader, or a group where they themselves are not appointed as leader. Lam−1P, May-1P and Minh-J share this frustration when they see that as there is no leader, decisions cannot be reached, and the group process does not go the way they want.

The fact that students see their ability in one area as giving them certain rights over others and that the majority of them hold the view that they themselves must be of higher position in the hierarchy, leads to competition for recognition, position and rewards among dominant members of the same group. Yen-FGI1 reports a case in which someone who thinks he/she contributes more than the group leader does not appreciate the leader and wants to "overthrow" the leader. Hoang-FGI1 reports the case in his experience where everyone wants attention from the supervisor and tries to show off their individual abilities when the supervisor is around, and the leader gives the impression that all the work is done by himself when presenting the group product. Toan and Dao-FGI2 and Hiep-FGI3 comment that group members tend to try to fight for recognition as capable individuals, and for a higher position in the group, and one way to do that is to try to be the leader. This leads to competitive behaviour and attitudes among members of the group rather than collaboration for the common group process and goal. These in turn generally make students dissatisfied with other members of the group, the group process, and the recognition each may receive.

On the other hand, the lower-ranking people feel frustrated because they are not given enough space to talk, and when they talk; their ideas are not sufficiently appreciated. For example, Hoai-H feels frustrated because "they disagreed when they did not yet fully understand my ideas" (Hoai-537RIH). Hoai-H is also not satisfied due to the feeling of inferiority that she experiences during this group work. Lien-I feels frustrated because Tuyet-I does not appreciate her ideas but turns to ask Khoi-I instead. Furthermore, when the responsibility for the group task is put on one person, and that person feels frustrated because he/she has to pull others' weight. The ones who are ranked lower and do less also feel frustrated because their contribution is not appreciated and thus does not have chance to be taken up. Thus, frustration and dissatisfaction are generally felt by both the lower-ranking and the higher-ranking members of the group.

In summary, the perception of hierarchy is associated with the competition for ranking, for recognition and for rewards, as was reported in the RIs and FGIs. In addition, it is associated with unequal and unappreciated contributions from members. These attitudes and behaviours relate to resentment and dissatisfaction from both those perceived as higher in rank and those perceived as lower in rank as well as unsatisfactory results, as not all resources are fully exploited.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The study analyses the students' perception of hierarchy in group work interaction and how it affects group work interaction and satisfaction. This emerging pattern reflects Nguyen's (2018) remarks that though hierarchy might be universal when we put any two persons together, the Asian structure tends to be more strongly hierarchical. However, the study advances our knowledge by problematising the unquestioned assumption that the students should be ranked hierarchically and its effects on group work. By using three sources of data to analyse students' interactions, their perceptions of the interactions and their general views and experience in group work, the study shows the prevalence of the perception of hierarchy and how this perception hinders equal and productive group participation and students' satisfaction with the group process and product.

Just over half of the participants in the retrospective interviews brought up the topic of hierarchy to explain aspects of the interaction, with hierarchy accounting for 12% of the data, and with no prompting from the interviewer. And when the topic was raised by students in the focus groups (again without intervention from the facilitator), more than three quarters of the participants volunteered comments and opinions, accounting for 20% of the data. This demonstrates that questions of hierarchy are prominent in

the thinking of Vietnamese students when they consider group work.

Hierarchy is a fundamental aspect of the students' perception of the organisation of groups and in the evaluation of ideas and members' competence. This perception is associated with the participants' dissatisfaction with group work. The ones who think they are more competent are frustrated with not being recognised as such, with others' few and invalid contributions and with having to do a larger share of the task. The ones who think they are less competent are frustrated with not being given the chance to contribute, and with their contributions not being appreciated. As discussed in the background section, when ideas are not sufficiently appreciated, the group resources are not brought to full use, which may not lead to the best group work results because the diversity of ideas is not fully produced. In this study, perceiving competences of the members of the group as hierarchical rather than diverse can negatively influence not just the process and diversity of ideas, but also the satisfaction of the group members.

The students in this study see the competition for personal recognition and position among the members of the group as negative. The ranking of the members' competence, position and importance in a hierarchy is the underlying reason for competitive instead of collaborative behaviours. However, there is a conflict in the students' perception when they complain about the competition but acknowledge the hierarchy of competence unquestioningly. This finding suggests that in order to understand the Vietnamese students' collaborative behaviours and their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with group work, we need to recognise a shared assumption among the majority of the students that there is a hierarchy of competence and that such a hierarchy is deemed to be necessary. Without acknowledging this underlying factor, teamwork training may not improve group work since in this analysis, the ones who have been trained claim their competence and think they are more capable than others in dealing with the group task. Without proper understanding of the underlying perceptions and values, the training of group work skills would not reduce students' frustration but would instead add to it by creating another hierarchy: the trained and the untrained as evidenced in this study.

The pervasiveness of the perception of hierarchy and the constant comparison and competition among members in this study point to underlying cultural and educational values. The unquestioned assumption of hierarchy corresponds with high power distance of Vietnamese culture (Hofstede, 2001). However, it is worth noting that in Hofstede's definition, people in a high power distance culture expect and accept unequal distribution of power and status. Here, although the students expect unequal power, such distance creates competition, and they are not satisfied with it; in other words they expect it, but do not accept it.

The fact that students report their preference for hierarchical group organisation and for a group with a leader concurs with what Hoang and Pham (2019), Pham (2014), Pham and Renshaw (2015) and Nguyen (2008) find in their studies. However, triangulating the three sources of data in this present study allows insights into the ways in which the power dynamics play out; the fact that the students report that they prefer hierarchical decision-making does not necessarily mean that they will be satisfied when the decision is left for the leader to make. Furthermore, when they report that they want to have a leader, this does not necessarily mean they will be satisfied if a leader is assigned in a group. This is because of the competition among members to be recognised as more competent in order to have more power as there are frequently several members who assume they are more qualified than the group leader. Competition creates a win-lose situation. The power dynamic is, therefore, more complicated because it breeds resentment. Thus, cultural appropriate alternative pedagogy dealing with group leadership might be much more complex than just assigning a leader. More delicate understanding and consideration of contexts and power dynamics within the group work would be more helpful.

The findings of this study concur with the literature of effective teamwork which indicates that hierarchical organisation, or simply assigning a leader to a group does not produce a quantity of ideas and does not facilitate group work processes or group members' satisfaction with the process. Since hierarchy is not just based on one criterion, submitting to one hierarchy may mean violating another. The association between one hierarchy and another, such as between language competence and quality of creative ideas, is, indeed found invalid by the students themselves. Catering to stated preferences of hierarchy and harmony among those of close relationships could help improve students' satisfaction and make students contribute more fairly to the task in a learning group (Pham & Renshaw, 2015). However, whether such treatment is an optimal solution to creative group work difficulties in the Vietnamese context is still a question left unanswered. An alternative methodology needs to be devised, possibly involving raising awareness and developing an attitude of appreciating of the diversity of resources and equality within the group (e.g. intellectual, imaginative and language resources), before proceeding with group interaction. Training students to acquire a collaborative mindset, considering other group members as equal contributors (Choi & Iwashita, 2016) despite the possible differences in abilities and competence may pave the way to better and more effective group interaction.

As this study problematises the students' unquestioned assumption of hierarchy, pedagogical practices that might promote hierarchical ranking of students and competitive mindset might need to be problematised and challenged. As remarked by Nguyen (2018), despite the collaborative notion of collectivism, Vietnamese schools tend to promote individual student, inter-class and inter-school competition publicly and explicitly. In Hoang and Pham's (2019) study, teachers are found to unintentionally teach hierarchy and reinforce inequality among students by giving students unequal opportunities for participation based on their English competence. Such pedagogical practices also need to be explored and changed; otherwise, they might promote hierarchical perception among students, which may negatively influence their development of collaborative skills and attitudes.

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Declaration of competing interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Appendix A

Questions used during the retrospective interview

1. Could you please tell me your understanding of what your conversation partner said in this episode?
2. What were you thinking when your conversation was expressing their ideas in this episode? What were you concentrating on doing when your conversation partner was saying this?
3. Did you say what you had been thinking after your partners' turn or not? If not, what was there in your mind that you did not say?
4. What did you think when your conversation partners responded to your ideas or suggestions in this episode?
5. Did anyone else's reaction cause you to talk differently from what you had planned? Did anyone else's interactions make you want to talk more or to talk less?
6. What were your alternatives? What else could you have said?

Appendix B

Questions used in the focus group interviews:

1. How do you find group work/teamwork?
2. What do you think makes group work/teamwork successful?
3. What do you think may hinder group work/teamwork?
4. Can you tell us about an experience of successful group work/teamwork that you participated in?
5. Can you tell us about an experience of less successful group work/teamwork that you participated in?

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