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Effects of Group Work on the Academic Performance of High School Students in EMI Classrooms in Riyadh

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Abstract

The present study investigates the effects of group work on the academic performance of high school students in English as a Medium of Instruction classrooms in Riyadh. Recognizing the growing prevalence of EMI environments and the unique challenges non-native speakers face, the research aims to explore collaborative learning dynamics and their impact on student outcomes. Using a mixed-methods approach, approximately 60 tenth-grade students were divided into groups across three classes of varying sizes, participating in a structured group work intervention over two months. To test if group work had any effects on students' academic performance, pre-tests and post-tests in chemistry were held to compare their results before and after group work was implemented for 2 months. Also, the present study analyzed patterns of interaction the students had by gathering qualitative observations and surveys from students and their respective teacher about the students' experiences and the drawbacks they faced during group work. The results indicate a significant increase in average post-test scores, with smaller class sizes yielding more substantial academic gains. Findings reveal that group work enhances comprehension and retention and fosters a supportive learning environment that encourages peer interaction, critical thinking, and communication skills. The present study contributes valuable information about the effectiveness of group work in EMI settings by highlighting group work's potential for improving educational practices and informing future research on collaborative learning in EMI classrooms.

Keywords: Group Work, Emi, Class Size, Language Proficiency And Academic Success, Academic Performance in Emi Classrooms, Collaborative Learning, Emi Challenges, Peer Learning, Active Learning, Challenges Of Emi In Non-Native English Environments

Introduction

The influence of education on laying down the groundwork for individual and societal development has been significant through generations (Coetzee, 2023). It is a process that equips individuals with knowledge and skills that later shape the social and economic structures within which societies operate (Dunne, 2021). As societies developed, new teaching techniques surfaced (Oyedotun, 2020). Most notably, interactive and student-centered teaching has been a prevailing theme over the last few decades (Li, 2023). This

shift is in response to a growing view that passive learning leads to less engagement of the students and reduced understanding of the subject matter. Indeed, modern educational philosophies have given increasing credence to active student involvement with course content, application of knowledge in real-world settings, and attainment of lifelong learning competencies (Metzger & Langley, 2020).

Such strategies aim to get students to be active participants in their learning, interacting with peers during problem-solving and discussions that contribute directly or indirectly toward a better educational experience for the student (Qureshi et al., 2023). In alignment with this notion, Ranbir (2023) noted that discussion, groups, and collaborative work allow students to create critical thinking and communication skills essential to maneuvering the workplace. In this context, Freeman et al. (2014) and McGreevy and Church (2020) found that active learning is one of the favorites as it increases comprehension and retention among students for various courses. Specifically, Shirmin et al. (2019) recognized group work as a significant pedagogical approach in the active learning model for teaching teamwork and communication skills. Group work enables students to share in an interactive environment to learn from each other and build their interpersonal skills (Herrera-Pavo, 2021). Faust (2021) expanded on this idea by stating that well-structured group work has been reported to foster peer-to-peer learning and offer students exposure to the vast perspectives that ultimately enhance academic performance. Previously, Siddique et al. (2020) laid down the basis of this hypothesis by claiming that peer- to-peer learning is particularly effective in breaking down complex topics into manageable components, as students often explain concepts to their peers in simpler terms. This consensus was challenged in a study conducted by Keramati and Gillies (2021), who noted that its potential is often hindered by barriers such as disparity in participation, group disputes, and lack of individual accountability. These challenges emphasize the importance of the context of the group work setting, with contextual factors, including the size of the class and the task design, playing a crucial role in the success of group work (Flook et al., 2020; Wilson et al., 2018). As various teaching methods have arisen, Flook et al. (2020) stated that group work is among the most prevalent teaching methods used across all educational levels, from kindergarten to graduate programs. Sarong (2024) emphasized that this method is crucial in modern education because of its potential to reflect workplace environments where collaboration and teamwork are essential. As its usage has grown, it has been the subject of extensive study because of its fluctuating results, specifically in exploring why some groups are more successful than others (Woodley et al., 2019). Studies have shown that group work that promotes students' interdependence to achieve shared goals improves their performance and attitudes toward STEM subjects (Wilson et al., 2018). Bjørke & Moen (2020) analyzed this pattern as the result of students developing a sense of responsibility for their learning and the learning of their peers. However, despite being widely researched, the effects of teamwork on students using a foreign language remain unexplored, highlighting an important factor that was not taken into account in previous studies (Masri, 2019). This omission is significant given the increasing prevalence of EMI classrooms worldwide and the unique challenges non-native speakers face in such environments.

English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) refers to teaching academic subjects using English in countries that do not have English as the native language, as is the case with

international high schools in Riyadh (Alkhateeb & Alhawsawi, 2023). Due to internationalization, EMI has been widely adopted in schools and universities (Block & Moncada-Comas, 2022; Zhou et al., 2023). Kuteeva (2020), Murata (2019), Galloway (2017), and Helm (2020) claim that this global shift toward EMI is driven by the demand for graduates who are proficient in English, which is considered the lingua franca in many professional fields. In this context, group work becomes even more complicated (Ibrahim, 2001; Lee, 2014; An et al., 2021). Li & Pei (2024) expanded on this topic by stating that in such an environment, students have to work not only with the subject matter but also overcome the added challenge of language proficiency, which may affect the general productivity of group activities. Contrary to the consensus that group work boosts students' performance, Tenzer et al. (2021) claimed this can lead to miscommunication and reduced participation. Therefore, it is crucial to understand whether group work conducted in EMI settings boosts students' academic performance or whether a language barrier hinders their progression. Hence, the primary aim of the present study is to examine the effects of EMI on the academic performance of high school students sharing in group work in Riyadh by answering the following questions:

1-How does group work in EMI settings influence the academic performance of high school students in Riyadh International schools?

2- How do class size and structure impact the academic performance of high school students studying in groups in EMI classrooms?

Literature Review

Literature has focused on how group work affects students' performance within traditional classrooms, particularly in Western nations. Most studies, such as those by Koles et al. (2020), Scharff et al. (2020), Carpenter et al. (2021), Slavin (1978), Swing & Peterson (1982), Abrami et al. (2000), and Gaudet et al. (2010), have leaned towards a focus on the implications of group work for countries where English is their native language. These studies emphasize collaboration's significance in promoting teamwork, critical thinking, and academic success. However, the context in which group work occurs is key to its success (Baninajarian & Abdullah, 2009). While extensive studies highlight group work's influence on academic outcomes, Masri (2019) claims that few have examined its role in EMI settings, especially in non-English-speaking regions in the Middle East. According to Grossman et al. (2021), this region tends to have one of the fewest cultural resemblances with other cultures due to its cultural norms, religious beliefs, and lack of diversity. Quotah (2023) emphasizes these socio- cultural factors in Saudi Arabia, where social dynamics, learning habits, and group interactions differ significantly from those observed in Western nations. Therefore, its results might deviate significantly from other regions, as present in Alhamami's (2024) study. Hence, this study uniquely investigates group work in a Saudi EMI context, aiming to fill this gap.

Moreover, research by Herrera-Pavo (2021), Chandra & Palvia (2021), Flaherty (2022), Vicentini & Camocini (2023), and Campbell et al. (2023) demonstrates that group work fosters peer-to-peer learning, where students simplify complex concepts for each other. This process helps break down barriers to understanding by encouraging students to communicate in more straightforward, relatable terms (Lapitan, 2023). Nevertheless, Ghanbari and Abdolrezapour (2020) claimed that existing studies tend to overlook how class size and structure affect group dynamics and outcomes. In the general scheme of learning, Harfitt and Tsui (2015) claim that larger classes may dilute learning effectiveness by reducing student

attention, while smaller classes might encourage more active participation. On the other hand, Blatchford and Russell (2018) claimed that class size may not be associated with a particular difference in the students' results. However, this conclusion does not consider how these dynamics might shift in non- native language environments (Gao & Li, 2023). Therefore, this study will abridge this gap by investigating the effects of class size within EMI settings on international high school students in Saudi Arabia.

It is further observed that, despite its proven advantages, collaborative learning presents some difficulties, especially in EMI classrooms, as documented by Yuan et al. (2023), Kaur (2020), Othman (2024), and Kopinska & Fernández-Costales (2023). These limitations include language proficiency differences that can exacerbate unequal participation and accountability (Barra & Carbone, 2020). Curle et al. (2020) hold that the effects of group work on academic performance within an EMI framework show whether such an influence may be related to the possible barrier to the members' language proficiency. Hence, this study will analyze whether high school students studying in Riyadh's international schools with varying language proficiency experience differences in group work effectiveness, thus filling a gap in the literature, specifically on group work in non-native English-speaking settings.

Methodology

The methodology looks at how group work affects the academic achievements of high school students within Riyadh EMI classrooms. To provide a balanced perspective on how language influences group dynamics and performance, approximately 60 students from 10th grade at an international school in Riyadh were selected and divided into four groups, forming about 15 groups. This sample includes three classes that vary in size, taking how class size affects the overall learning experience in context. A controlled, phased grouping strategy was implemented for 2 months to examine how different class structures impact student performance within EMI settings. The 2 months were chosen to prevent students' fatigue and provide reliable results for the overall sample.

Regarding data collection, qualitative methods were employed alongside quantitative measures to encompass a comprehensive understanding of the student's experiences and outcomes. Notably, for quantitative measures, students were given pre-tests and post-tests in chemistry, administered at the start and conclusion of the study period to assess changes in academic performance. Chemistry was chosen based on it being a subject that involves both content and comprehension skills rather than language skills. Questions used for the tests were gathered from past AP papers because it is a standardized exam considered reliable by institutions and educational systems worldwide. To validate the results of the pre-test and post- test, 15 students from other classes not included in this study were selected to participate in a pilot study to ensure that the difficulty of both exams is equal relative to the 10th-grade students' academic level. In addition, observational techniques and surveys were used to gauge group dynamics by recording qualitative data on their engagement, participation, perceived challenges, and communication. For quantitative analysis, pre-test and post-test scores were compared using statistical methods to ascertain whether significant academic gains were observed. For qualitative analysis, observations and survey responses were analyzed to identify common trends in students' experiences, including perceived group effectiveness, communication challenges, and the overall comfort level in EMI group work settings.

Findings and Discussion

Improvements in Academic Performance

As stated in chapter 3, students were given 2 exams: one before implementing group work in their classes, pre-test, and one after 2 months of implementing group work, post-test. The present study used statistical methods, such as the paired t-test, to find trends among students after we implemented group work in their classes.

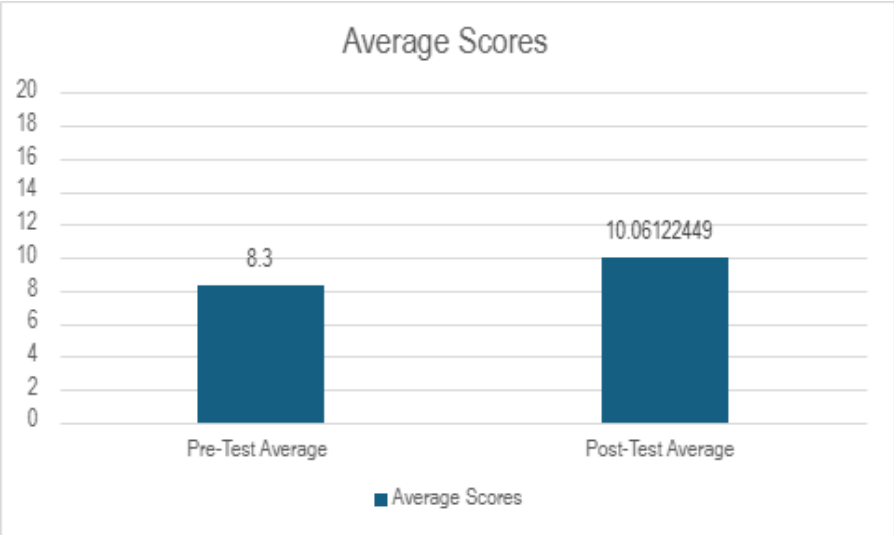


Figure 1

As shown in Figure 1.0, the student's overall results demonstrate significant academic improvement after conducting the group work experiment. The pre-test had an average score of 8.3, indicating a baseline measure of students' performances. Their scores ranged from 3 to 13. This variability, shown in Figure 1.1, shows that the students came in at different levels of comprehension prior to the intervention, which is something to be aware of, especially as it shows varying baseline levels and the necessity for a customized approach to pedagogy.

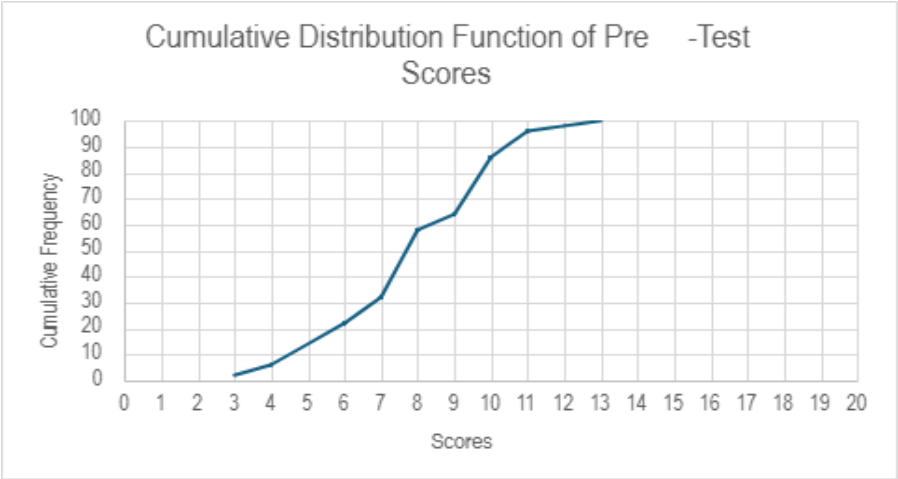


Figure 1.1

On the other hand, the average post-test score increased to approximately 10, which translated to about a 21.2% increase. This increase is statistically significant, as confirmed by the paired t-test (p-value= 0.001698638). This paired t-test was used to rule out variability caused by external factors using a sophisticated statistical method that compares the same

group of students before and after the intervention. Not only are the results significant, but they also showed less variability in scores, as shown in Figure 1.2. Therefore, group work boosts students' performance in EMI classrooms.

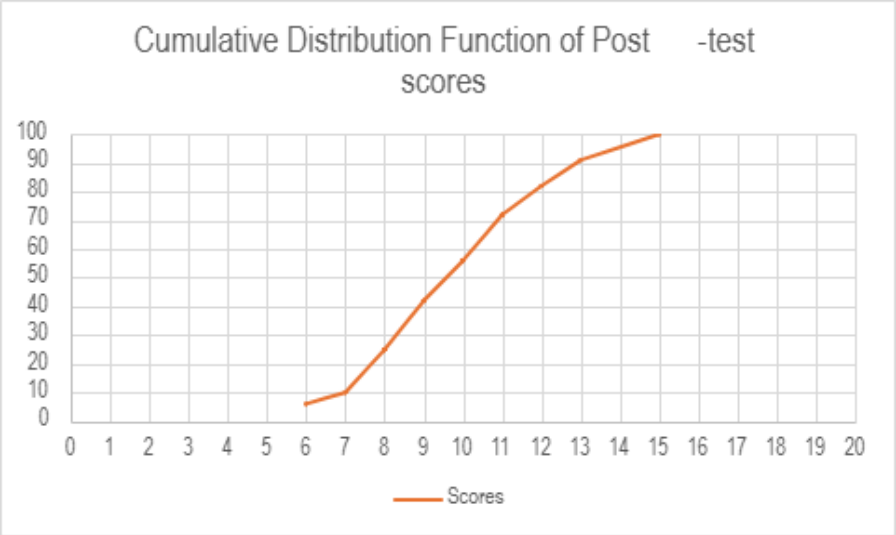


Figure 1.2

Most students linked their improvements to the interactive environment group work has provided. For instance, a student recounted a situation where he did not understand the lesson directly from the teacher and had learned a different way to understand the same concept through a peer's analogy. This instance and other instances provided by the students show that group work provides a friendly environment that helps them understand complex concepts better. These findings support the observations of Herrera-Pavo (2021) and Chandra & Palvia (2021), which emphasized that group work fosters peer-to-peer learning by allowing students to simplify complex concepts for each other. This significant performance improvement can also be attributed to the dynamic and interactive environment created by group work, which encourages active participation and communication among students, as demonstrated by qualitative data gathered. Feedback from the teacher involved in the study supports this, as he noticed a significant improvement in interactions between the students and their counterparts and the teacher himself. He stated that some students appeared more confident in asking questions during group activities, which led to a deeper understanding of the material and better engagement overall. These results go in line with the claims of Freeman et al. (2014), McGreevy and Church (2020), and Dzaiy & Abdullah (2024), which demonstrated that active learning strategies, including group work, are more effective than passive teaching methods in increasing both comprehension and retention as the students engage with the material through discussions and collaborative problem-solving. These results are significant in EMI classrooms, as language barriers may hinder comprehension. In other words, they provide a method to mitigate these drawbacks by creating opportunities for students to clarify misunderstandings and reinforce their understanding through interaction. Additionally, some students pointed out that they perceived group work as a better opportunity to develop their ideas and correct their mistakes through constructive criticism. Indeed, a student stated that he initially misunderstood a concept and realized his mistake during a group discussion when he was presented with an alternative perspective. This aligns directly with the findings of Moore (2005) and Li (2023), which state that group

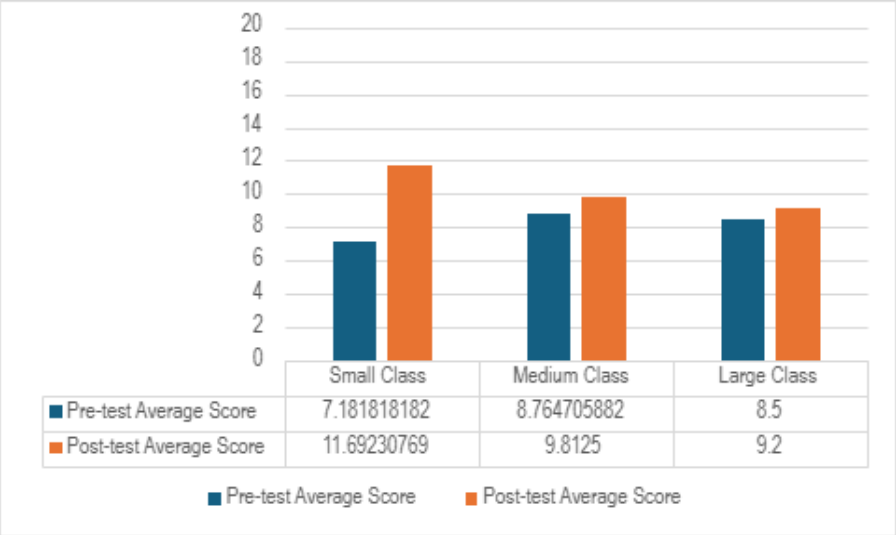
work boosts productivity through a constructivist learning environment that involves discussing ideas and constructive criticisms.

However, the results of this study reject the findings of Nguyen (2024), who found that students were subject to a more significant reduction in their grades while studying in EMI environments than those studying in their respective first language. Therefore, as both studies have different methodologies, this inconsistency highlights the significance of methodology in EMI classrooms. Notably, Nguyen's (2024) study used passive teaching methods that could amplify learning challenges in EMI contexts. In contrast, the present study shows that by adopting active learning strategies, especially group work, such drawbacks are avoided mainly, and students perform significantly better. This emphasizes that the success of EMI instruction is boosted by incorporating active learning strategies.

The Role of Class Size on Performance

Another objective of the current study is to examine the role of class size, which is the number of groups consisting of the same number of students in a class, on academic performance. To achieve so, students were drawn from three classes of varying sizes - a relatively small class, a medium class, and a large class. This allowed for a comparative analysis of how class size impacts the effectiveness of group work in EMI classrooms. The improvement of each class is shown in the following figure:

Figure 2.0



The most significant increase from all classes is shown in the smallest class, with their average scores increasing from 7.18 to 11.7 or an increase of 63%. This increase demonstrates that smaller class sizes create a more conducive environment for group work. In the medium-sized class, improvements were also observed, with average scores increasing by 11.95%. In the large class, the improvement of the average score was the least pronounced, as shown in the graph. 2.0, rising from 8.5 to 9.2, which is an increase of 8.2% only. While these gains were still significant, they suggest that larger class sizes pose challenges for maintaining the quality of group work. In fact, according to the surveys gathered, the teacher struggled the most in the largest class. Specifically, he mentioned that monitoring all groups effectively in the large class was challenging. This issue did not appear to be one-sided, only from the teacher's point of view. Indeed, some students stated that the teacher could not monitor and support their

groups effectively. This pattern indicates an issue linked to larger class sizes, as other classes did not mention this issue. Remarkably, this pattern and difference in improvements support the hypothesis of Ehrenberg et al. (2001), which indicates that smaller class sizes tend to create an environment where the teacher can control and interact more effectively with students. Akoto-Baako (2018) further reinforces this conclusion by stating that smaller classrooms encourage more frequent and meaningful interactions between students and teachers. This type of interaction is essential in a group work context because it allows the teacher to correct misconceptions immediately and steer a conversation in a more constructive direction. Therefore, smaller classes come on top when it comes to making the most out of group work, as students have a higher tendency to engage with their respective teachers.

In addition, the data gathered from the students and their teachers demonstrates increased classroom activity. However, the significance of this pattern decreased as class size became more prominent. In the small class, mainly, students explained that they felt more engaged and supported in group activities. They explained this by stating that the teacher was present to follow up on the activity and to provide more frequent feedback and clarifications. They also stated they felt more comfortable asking questions in group work than in a typical passive- learning class environment. In contrast, students in the large class noted that the lack of individualized attention and increased side talk within groups hindered their productivity. The number of students stating that they felt less comfortable asking questions increased as the class increased. This pattern supports the results of Blatchford and Russell (2019), who stated that larger classes with more groups tend to be less effective than smaller classes with fewer groups. Also, they build upon the findings of Nadile et al. (2021), which stated that students tended not to ask questions in large classes because of the fear of negative evaluation. Therefore, as this pattern can be seen in native, nonnative, group work, and passive-learning environments, group work in EMI classrooms does not necessarily reflect a unique pattern regarding the classroom size issue since large class sizes tend to have adverse effects in all situations. On the other hand, Blatchford (2003) emphasized that group size, rather than class size, is the root cause of these challenges. However, the present study suggests otherwise, as all classes in this study had the same group size but varying numbers of groups within each class. Indeed, the findings indicate that class size, rather than group size, has a more significant impact on the effectiveness of group work in EMI settings. This is caused by several reasons, as mentioned above, ranging from the difficulty of dividing the teachers' attention among a more significant number of groups, fear of asking questions, and noise arousing from side talk.

Conclusion

Group work has long been regarded as a pillar of collaborative learning. It has been extensively studied for its potential to improve academic performance. However, its effectiveness remains a heated argument in EMI classrooms, where students face subject matter and language challenges. To settle this conflict, our present study analysed the effects and patterns of implementing group work for 2 months in EMI classrooms in Riyadh. Hence, our findings support the hypothesis that group work boosts classroom performance. However, they revealed some variables that could impact its overall effectiveness.

Indeed, the difference between pre-test and post-test scores mentioned previously demonstrates a significant improvement in students' performance after implementing group work. Students attributed this improvement to the opportunity to exchange perspectives and clarify concepts with peers during group work. This aligns with the hypothesis that students tend to provide each other with different perspectives and unique ideas in environments where group work is present, which leads to a better learning environment.

Moreover, one of the most significant debates on the topic of group work is whether the class size and group size hold weight on its efficiency. The present study thrives to find an answer to this argument by isolating the group size variable to test the impact of class size alone. Hence, the present study yielded results that varied greatly from one class to another, indicating disparities in the effectiveness of group work based on class size rather than group size since each class had a different number of groups with the same number of students in each group. Remarkably, the smallest class exhibited the most significant academic gains. Students in the smallest class demonstrated higher engagement, more frequent participation in discussions, and an increased tendency to ask questions in class. Likewise, the teacher noted that controlling the class and providing more frequent feedback in the smaller classes was easier. In contrast, the largest class experienced more challenges, with students reporting difficulty receiving sufficient instructor support and struggling with group distractions. These findings indicate that when the size of a class decreases, the overall effectiveness of group work increases since student-teacher interactions tend to increase.

In closing, the present study highlights the significance of group work in EMI classrooms. Mainly, if done thoughtfully, group work allows students to deepen their understanding, develop problem- solving skills, gain confidence about their academic content, and become more engaged with their classmates and teachers. However, its level of success is tied to class size. Indeed, we advise educators to decrease the classroom size when implementing group work in EMI classrooms, as smaller classes tend to show better results in interaction, comfortability, and academic performance. Lastly, since EMI classrooms are increasingly becoming the standard at all educational levels worldwide, further exploring the most effective teaching approach in EMI classrooms is important.

Contributions

1. Provides insights into how group work affects academic performance in non-native English-speaking EMI classrooms, addressing a significant gap in existing literature.
2. Highlights the importance of class size in enhancing teacher-student interactions and the overall effectiveness of collaborative learning.
3. Reinforces the value of peer-to-peer learning as a significant contributor to understanding complex subjects and improving student performance.
4. Lays the groundwork for further studies on collaboration in diverse educational settings, opening avenues to explore cultural factors, language proficiency, and subject-specific challenges in EMI environments.
5. Demonstrates that group work fosters a more interactive and engaging learning environment, leading to increased student motivation and participation in classroom activities.

6. Illustrates how group work builds essential skills in students, such as teamwork, communication, and problem-solving, which are vital for students' academic and future professional success.

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