

Taken for a Ride: Students' Coping Strategies for Free-Riding in Group Work

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ABSTRACT

Group work, when effectively implemented, fosters a close bond and camaraderie among group members. It makes group tasks less overwhelming and even promotes greater work quality. However, if it is badly implemented, it may lead to discord and arguments among students within a group. Group work encompasses various areas of English language teaching and learning, hence, free-riding is expected. While language instructors equip themselves with multiple strategies to prevent free-riding, the results of this study indicate that students too have taken this in stride and come to accept and even expect free-riding in group work. Through interviews, this study gleans student perception on free-riding and reveals that despite their awareness of the manifestation and pitfalls of free-riding, students appreciate the group work's aptitude towards producing a better quality work. Students also revealed various coping strategies for tackling and prevent free-riding in group work.

Keywords: Free-riding, coping strategies, group work

INTRODUCTION

Hailed as one of the most effective classroom strategies in promoting interaction and collaboration, group work has long been recognised in the teaching and learning of English. When implemented diligently, the benefits of group work are manifold

and extend way beyond the classroom and into future workplaces. As Sheppard and Taylor (1999) eloquently put it "Many human endeavours cannot be accomplished individually, requiring instead that people combine their efforts towards a common goal" (p. 1147).

Nevertheless, despite meticulous planning and preparation on the part of language instructors, they are often plagued by problems of free-riding in group work. According to Börjesson *et al.* (2013), free-

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riding “occurs when one or several members of a group contribute so little to a group project that if the same grade is given to all members, the grade would be misleading and unfair” (p. 1). This highlights the inequality and misappropriation of marks should free-riding occur in group work.

Previous studies have documented incidences of free-riding and highlighted instructors’ and students’ complaints (Burdett, 2003; Li & Campbell, 2008; Davies, 2009; Börjesson *et al.*, 2013). Nevertheless, what is most bothersome about free-riding is that student grades may not be reflective of, or equal to, the effort and time they have put into a group task. Good students may have to shoulder more responsibilities of group tasks as they are seen as more capable and thus relied upon by other group members. Weaker students, on the other hand, resort to their survival instinct and free-ride in order to pass a course or in the hope of scoring better.

Unfortunately until today, there is no fail-safe way to prevent free-riding and this has been a major concern among language practitioners as they strive to be as fair and as objective as possible in their assessment of students’ group work. Realistically, it is quite impossible to eradicate free-riding as there are many variables that affect the outcome of any group work. For this reason, some students are wary of group work as they are sometimes required to participate in group work against their wishes or despite their preferences.

In view of the various considerations and intricacies in employing group work in

the language classroom, the current study is significant in that it explores strategies that students employ when faced with free-riding so that similar techniques could be conveyed to future students and implemented in future group work. The term ‘coping strategies’ as used in this paper refer to the methods or steps that students take to deal with free-riding problems in their group work.

This paper reveals student views regarding the probability of the occurrence of free-riding in group work and also strategies students employ when free-riding occurs. Hence, this paper raises the following research questions:

1. What are student perceptions regarding the probability of free-riding occurring in group work?
2. What are the strategies employed by students to cope with the occurrences of free-riding in group work?

In Universiti Malaysia Sabah, the UB00702 English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) course offered by the Centre for the Promotion of Knowledge and Language Learning requires students to participate in a group work throughout the 14 week duration of the course. The main objective for the inclusion of the group work in the course is to simulate workplace settings which often require team effort and encourage camaraderie among group members. Additionally, it aims to promote active interaction among team members in order to help improve language and communication of learners.

In this study, each student was assigned to work in a group of four to five at the beginning of the semester to undertake a group project throughout the semester. No specific group formation procedure was enforced and students were allowed to choose their own group members. This was in order to allow them to work with like-minded members, those who shared same or similar class schedules, and members whom they were most comfortable with, to promote a more conducive group-work environment for all students. The only exception to this was students who registered late and thus, assigned randomly to particular groups consisting of fewer members by the class instructor. Each group was allowed to determine its project title and related content.

It should be noted that most of the EOP students had registered for the course later than anticipated (normally semester 4 of their study in the university) due to various reasons including: repeating lower levels of pre-requisite English courses due to failures or obtaining low CGPA in the previous semesters. Consequently, most of these students are considered to have lower proficiency in English or are academically weak although this may not necessarily be the case. Nevertheless, after taking the EOP course for the semester, these students would use this group work experience to respond to the interview questions for this research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies have supported the use of group work in the English language teaching and learning classrooms and researchers have documented the successful use of group work (Sheppard & Stoller, 1995; Thomas, 2000; Holst, 2003; Beckett & Slater, 2005; Shaaban, 2005). Proponents of group work maintain that collaborative team work as present in group work leads to heightened communication skills that lead to greater group performance and ultimately better end products (Burdett, 2003; Oakley *et al.* 2004).

Advocates of student-centred collaborative learning counsel that meticulous planning is vital for classroom instructors before assigning any group work. Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier, none has been able to give a fool-proof method of completely eliminating free-riding. Free-riding usually occurs when students attempt to evade work or their duties, and instead, depend on other members of the group to complete a group task. To complicate matters, it is usually difficult for instructors to identify free-riders. As a consequence, marks awarded for group work and to the students may not be fair (Gajendran *et al.* 2004; Davies, 2009).

Documented widely in social, economic and educational research literature, the problem of free riding occurs when a member of the group benefits from the collective group's effort by contributing minimally. It is also identified as a form of 'social loafing' (Sheppard, 1993; Morris & Hayes, 1997; De Vita, 2001; Watkins,

2005). In cases where free-riding takes place, “students face conflicting demands between altruism and self-interest” (Davies, 2009, p. 563). Torn between their desire to help and unwillingness to become scapegoats due to their teammates’ lack of performance, some students inadvertently take up the responsibilities of the group tasks voluntarily, either out of genuine desire to help or impress others (Watkins, 2005), or reluctantly.

Whether due to different learning experiences or other reasons, group work has generally received mixed reaction from students. In a study conducted by Maiden and Perry (2001), some students view group work as an unnecessary source of stress. In a research conducted by Burdett (2003), it was found that not all good students are particularly fond of group assessments as they feel they can do the work faster and achieve more by working alone. Asian students seem to be “disheartened and helpless at having to complete mandatory group assignment” (Li & Campbell, 2008). In a study, Burdett (2003) obtained university students’ perceptions of group work and reported that quantitative data revealed that 57% of the students had agreed that their group work experiences were positive 26% viewed their group work experiences as negative while the rest were impartial. In addition, previous study has also shown that group work may not necessarily be beneficial to all members of the group. Börjesson *et al.* (2013) identified the role of “the victim” within the group, who is usually the weaker student who feels

that other group members are more capable of doing a better job, and who lets the others do the work in order to get a better grade for the group. These ‘victims’ rarely learn much from the group work experience.

Nevertheless, EOP practitioners often feel that they need to include group work in the EOP course as in essence it is believed to serve the purpose of getting learners to learn to communicate, collaborate and work with groups of people to attain a mutual gain. Similarly, studies have shown that most students view group work as a good way to improve work quality, to learn how to work in a group and to reduce workload as the task can be done with the help of others (Ford & Morice, 2003; Gajendran *et al.*, 2004; Davies, 2009; Shak, 2010).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Data for this study was gathered qualitatively from individual interviews with respondents based on convenience sampling where respondents were made up of students who had agreed to be interviewed and to participate in the research. A total of 16 second year students, aged between 21 to 22 years old, were the respondents in this research. Out of the 16 respondents, 14 were Malaysian students while two (2) were international students from China. The respondents included nine (9) Malays, four (4) Kadazandusun, one (1) Iban, and two (2) Chinese nationals from China.

Each interview session was guided by a set of semi-structured interview questions and was conducted at the end of the EOP course. Each respondent was required to

answer seven (7) interview questions on the common problems in group work, the frequency of free-riding in group work, student perception towards group work and strategies that they employed to overcome free-riding problems in their group work. The interview sessions lasted between 5 and 14 minutes. In total, the interviews yielded 140 minutes 32 seconds of recorded data.

Prior to the interview, each respondent was given approximately 15 minutes to have a preview of the interview questions. The questions were written in English and had a Bahasa Malaysia translation. The respondents were allowed to answer the interview questions in either English, Bahasa Malaysia or bilingually. Out of 16 respondents, four (4) respondents chose to answer the interview questions in English, six (6) chose to answer in Bahasa Malaysia, while the remaining six (6) answered in both languages, alternating between English and Bahasa Malaysia.

The interview sessions were transcribed in both English and Bahasa Malaysia. The responses were then coded based on emerging themes and later categorised and grouped accordingly. Where relevant and significant, the number of total comments is provided in the results and discussion section. All the translation in this study was undertaken by the author and verified by an English language lecturer whose native language is Bahasa Malaysia. A listing of all original quotes in Bahasa Malaysia is attached in the appendix.

Respondents were encouraged to provide their responses based on the

group work they had participated in while completing the UB00702 EOP course. The sharing, recommendations and suggestions given in the interviews were based on, and included the respondents' overall experiences in participating in group work and the free-riding issues they had faced.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Student perceptions regarding the probability of free-riding occurring in group work

Data collected from the respondents' feedback in this study indicated that 11 out of 16 respondents perceived free-riding as a very common phenomenon in group work. One respondent expressed that

there are definitely nine or eight out of ten cases of free-riding in group work.¹ (Respondent 6)

While another respondent said that

each one [sic] (group work) must have problem.... Err...this thing about attitude I think... responsibility about work about group not have [sic]... one member [sic] the best and one will definitely free-ride.² (Respondent 13)

Most of the respondents were of the opinion that group work was very susceptible to incidences of free-riding.

Nevertheless, one respondent who commented that free-riding seldom occurred reasoned that free-riding may take place because;

sometimes... maybe they listen to our opinion, but they don't have own opinion. (Respondent 16)

it justifies that some students may have appeared to free-ride simply because they did not have any opinions, or did not share opinions regarding the subject. It is possible that free-riding students may be weak and therefore could not contribute to the discussion significantly.

As highlighted in previous studies by Börjesson *et al.* (2013) and Davies (2009), the occurrence of free-riding in group work is quite rampant. In the classroom, the prevalence of group work has brought about the increasing instances of free-riding. In turn, students begin to view free-riding as a normal occurrence rather than something unexpected. Most students it seems take it for granted that group work entails having to deal with free-riders among them. This is supported by data collected from this study which indicated that most respondents agreed that free-riding is a common phenomenon in group work.

Due to the reason that most students perceive free-riding to be a common occurrence, it is therefore quite important that instructors utilising group work brief their students on how to deal with free-riding issues. By doing this, students will be able to prepare themselves better to handle potential group problems. Early warning will also help to discourage free-riding behaviour among students as they are aware that their actions will be monitored, and that

there will repercussion. The next part of this paper will explore strategies employed by students to deal with free-riders in their group work.

Strategies employed by students to cope with the occurrences of free-riding in group work

i. Meting out punishment

Data showed that a majority of the respondents agreed that some form of punishment or penalty should be imposed on free-riders.

In order to make she [sic] realise... there should be a penalise [sic].
(Respondent 7)

This view as expressed by a respondent is supported by another who said that

if we don't punish this person, he might continue with his habit and not cooperate. So, (we) need to teach (him) a lesson so that he is aware of his mistakes.³ (Respondent 5)

The responses indicate that respondents are in favour of meting out punishment, for instance imposing penalty on the free-rider as a deterrent. As a respondent pointed out, the free-rider

must be punished even if the punishment is light.⁴ (Respondent 10)

ii. Discuss the problem with the free-rider

Many respondents are of the opinion that meeting and discussing the issue with the free-rider is the first step to be taken when it first occurs. A respondent explained that by discussing with the free-rider, the specific problems the group faces as a result of the lack of input from him or her will enable the free-rider to reflect on his or her lack of contribution. This will hopefully prompt immediate changes and encourage the member who is lackadaisical to contribute to the team. Table 1 below shows the respondents' suggestions to discuss the problems with the free-rider:

The respondents' recommendation to discuss the problem with the free-riding member of the group is consistent with the findings of another study where Li and Campbell (2008) recommended that students should be encouraged to manage conflict between group members and clarify the responsibilities and duties of group members to tackle free-riding issues.

iii. Inform the lecturer

Respondents when faced with free-riders in their group can also inform the lecturer of their problem. Some respondents suggested reporting free-riders to their course lecturers while one stated that he would ask the free-rider to do his or her share of work first and if ignored, will highlight the matter to the lecturer concerned. Interestingly, one respondent reported that his lecturer's reaction when informed of free-riding problem in group work is to leave it to the respondent's group members to decide on the fate of their free-riding mate. Unfortunately in this case, such a response did not help in solving the matter. These respondents' views are presented in Table 2.

A study by Ford and Morice (2003) revealed that some students kept group conflicts to themselves as they felt that the outcome would not be any better even if they informed their lecturers of the free-riding problem. Nevertheless, from the respondents' responses, highlighting free-riding issues to the lecturers had its own merit. A better way perhaps to overcome

TABLE 1
Discuss Problems with Free-rider

Interview Extract	Respondent
<i>first, we meet and discuss... at least we work together as long as she... uh willing to... not blaming, not push [sic] them to do the work but we group work [sic] in a group again.</i>	Respondent 2
<i>we will meet and discuss as a group and inform each member of the problem... tell the person (free-rider) that he did not do his work and suggest to him how we can cooperate.⁵</i>	Respondent 5
<i>The student who free-ride, he/she needs to be chastised... Discuss with him/her appropriately.⁶</i>	Respondent 8

this is for the course lecturer to instruct the groups to report occurrences of free-riding earlier to avoid any further discord that may affect group performance later. In addition, students should be warned beforehand that they may need to resolve free-riding issues on their own and therefore should plan for equal work distribution.

iv. Warn or threaten the free-rider

Some respondents' coping strategies included warning and threatening the free-riders in hope of getting the latter to comply and contribute to the group's effort. It was found in this study that some respondents believed that by warning or threatening the free-riding group member, they could get that member to comply and shoulder tasks assigned to him or her. Table 3 below quotes the respondents' warnings and threats to free-riders:

TABLE 2
Inform the lecturer

Interview Extract	Respondent
<i>When the problem going to be [sic] serious... we should tell the lecturer with what [sic] the problem, so maybe [sic] lecturer can help.</i>	Respondent 2
<i>If he or she continue [sic] to not do the work, I will inform the lecturer.⁷</i>	Respondent 6
<i>it is up to you whether you want to include his/her name in the group.⁸</i>	Respondent 4
<i>so, we will have to think twice, whether or not to include his name in the group.⁹</i>	Respondent 4

TABLE 3
Warn or threaten the free-rider

Interview Extract	Respondent
<i>if you don't do any work, I will not put your name in this assignment. From there on, he/she will fear that if he/she relaxes, he/she will get a zero.¹⁰</i>	Respondent 4
<i>If they don't come to our group discussion, scold them to warn them to solve this problem.¹¹</i>	Respondent 1
<i>I will say to him/her, if you do it, okay there'll be marks. We will all get equal marks if that's the case.¹²</i>	Respondent 14

Maiden and Perry (2011) documented a Viva warning approach to caution students of their shortcomings in the group work which is consistent with the findings of the present study whereby the respondents felt that there was a need to warn the perpetrator in free-riding incidences. Their study indicated that 45% of their respondents felt the need "to challenge an underperforming group member" (p. 457). This supports the findings of the present study that group members who free-ride should be warned so that they are aware that their actions will not be condoned and there will be consequences should they choose to ignore the warning.

v. Monitor group work progress

Data also revealed that one of the methods students used to cope with free-riding in group work was to ensure that they monitor their work progress. In addition

to that, as part of the group monitoring progress, a respondent also suggested setting specific deadlines for members to adhere to. There seems to be merit in these coping strategies because if the group work progress was closely monitored and kept on track, members of the group would most likely be on their toes during subsequent meetings. Table 4 below shows respondents' support for monitoring group work progress:

A study by Poon (2011) indicated that some students may not like the idea of having their peers assess their contributions to the group work as it may affect their friendship. Nevertheless, the suggestion or agreement to have some form of work progress monitoring may deter free-riding occurrences.

vi. Ignore the problem or evade potential conflict

Ironically, although a majority of the respondents support punishing the free-riders, for reasons of their own, some respondents choose to ignore the free-rider's lack of contribution and continue on with the group work tasks without the free-rider's cooperation or input. Data revealed some respondents were left with no choice but to complete the group task without the contribution of the free-rider for the overall benefit of the group. The data also indicated that despite the fact that respondents support penalising free-riders, they are at the same time sympathetic towards the free-riders. Table 5 below presents the extracts of some of the responses given.

TABLE 4
Monitor group work progress

Interview Extract	Respondent
<i>we'll ask for his/her work report. Present in front of the class what he/she has done so far... see if he/she understands.</i> ¹³	Respondent 9
<i>if (we) need to submit (the assignment) this week, they must give it two days ahead.</i> ¹⁴	Respondent 3

TABLE 5
Ignore the problem

Interview Extract	Respondent
<i>Let it be... this has happened before</i> ¹⁵	Respondent 1
<i>I just finish the work</i>	Respondent 7
<i>the solution is I'll help him to do the task for the sake of the group.</i> ¹⁶	Respondent 14
<i>everyone has feelings of sympathy, right? We cannot bear to see our friend not getting any marks.</i> ¹⁷	Respondent 4
<i>maybe we don't know his/her problem... we still have to complete it anyway. I will include his name... because I understand that he may have his own problems.</i> ¹⁸	Respondent 11

It can be surmised from data that some respondents ignore free-riding problems in order to avoid conflict with their group mates. It is also documented that some respondents are willing to take up additional work load as they view it as doing a favour for the group mates.

CONCLUSION

Students were clearly aware of the perks and drawbacks of group work. They have realised that although group work may not have been ideal in many instances, the benefits of group work could not be disputed. As they juggled between social and academic commitments, they needed to draw a line between what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour of group members. The results of this study are significant in that these coping strategies could be disseminated to students so that they are aware of options and steps that they could take when attempting to resolve conflicts involving free-riding problems in group work. Data analysis revealed that while students saw the need for meting out punishment to their free-riding group mates, they also felt that it was necessary to weigh and consider consequences of their actions before doing so.

University students should be aware that as they step into adulthood and the working world, society would expect them to have the necessary social competence and communication skills to prepare for the workplace. Karau and Williams (1993) attested that “many of life’s most important tasks can only be accomplished in groups,

and many group tasks are collective tasks that require the pooling of individual members’ inputs” (p. 681). As expressed by one respondent,

*I prefer working in groups as it saves time and increases creativity. If every member focuses on the task assigned or given, we will have a very good outcome.*¹⁹ (Respondent 12)

Therefore, participating in group work in the classroom should be viewed positively and regarded as a practice and challenge in manoeuvring future workplace situations.

White *et al.* (2007) expressed that “a continuing challenge for educators using group work is to ensure that it remains a positive learning experience for student” (p. 78). In view of the fact free-riding is bound to happen in group tasks, it is important course instructors are certain that group work is necessary, and will help students to attain course objectives. Apart from that, course instructors employing group work in the classroom should impose specific measures to ensure that all members participate equally. A clear guideline should also be in place and this information must be disseminated succinctly to avoid the issue of free-riding (Ford & Morice, 2003; Shak, 2014). Additionally, instructors can specify the necessary steps to be taken should free-riding issue rear its ugly head so that prompt actions can be taken to correct the problem before it is too late. Further recommendations on instructors’ strategies

to prevent free-riding can be found in Shak (2014).

It is recommended that in-depth studies are undertaken on the effects of the implementation of group work in the language classroom. One way to do this is through comparison and analysis of student performances between group and non-group tasks. In addition, further exploration in task distribution, peer support and motivation are also recommended for future studies.

In conclusion, the abundant benefits of group work can only be truly enjoyed when members of the team co-operate and contribute equally in the task. As a respondent aptly said, *must believe... all believe [sic]. Trust, confidence and believe is [sic] very important in group work.* (Respondent 15)

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APPENDIX I

LIST OF ORIGINAL INTERVIEW QUOTES

- ¹ “Dalam sepuluh kerja berkumpul, mesti ada sembilan atau lapan yang menumpang.”
- ² “...mesti ada menumpang.”
- ³ “Kalau kita tidak bagi hukuman sama orang ini, mungkin dia tetap akan meneruskan sikapnya tidak berkerjasama. So kena bagi pengajaran supaya dia sedar dia punya kesilapan.”
- ⁴ “Mesti menerima hukuman biarpun hukuman tidak berat.”
- ⁵ “secara group kami akan berjumpa dan bagitau masalah setiap group ini bahawa... terus-teranglah orang ni dia tidak buat kerja dan bagi pendapat dia macam mana kita berkerjasama.”
- ⁶ “Student yang menumpang ni, dia perlu macam dibagi teguranlah... Bawa berbincang bagus-bagus.”
- ⁷ “Kalau dia masih tidak buat, saya bagitau lecturerlah.”
- ⁸ “Itu terpulang dengan awak samada kamu mahu nama dia ada dalam group ataupun tidak.”
- ⁹ “Jadi kita pun macam *thinking twice*, berfikir dua kali, samada kita letakkan dia dalam group atau tidak.
- ¹⁰ “kalau kamu tidak buat kerja, saya akan tidak letak nama kamu dalam assignment ini. Jadi dari situ dia akan rasa macam takutlah sebab mungkin jika dia rilek dia ada dapat zero.”
- ¹¹ “...marah diorang bagi warning untuk selesaikan ni masalah lah.”
- ¹² “Sia akan cakap dia, kalau kamu buat, ok ada markahlah macam tu. Kita dapat semua ratalah macam itu.”
- ¹³ “kita minta laporan kerja dia. Present depan kelas apa kerja dia setakat ini... tengok dia faham ke tidak.”
- ¹⁴ “Kalau minggu ni hantar, dua hari sebelum tu mesti bagilah.”
- ¹⁵ “biarkan sajalah... pernahlah hadapi masalah begini”
- ¹⁶ “Penyelesaian dia, saya bantu dia untuk membuat tugas untuk membantu kumpulan.”
- ¹⁷ “memang semua manusia ada rasa belas kasihan kan? Kita tidak sanggup tengok kawan kita tu dia macam tidak dapat markahlah.”
- ¹⁸ “Mungkin kita tidak tahu masalah dia... apa-apa pun kita kena siapkan. I will include his name... sebab saya faham mungkin ada masalahnya.”
- ¹⁹ “Saya lebih suka bekerja secara berkumpul kerana itu lebih menjimatkan masa dan kreativiti kerja tu lebih banyak. Kalau setiap ahli menumpukan kerja yang disuruh atau yang dibagi oleh seseorang, kita akan dapat hasil yang memuaskanlah.”

