How Does Limited English Proficiency of Thai Peers Impact Group Work Dynamics in EMI Settings? Insights from International Students in Thailand

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores how Thai students' limited English proficiency affects group work dynamics from the perspective of international students in English-medium instruction (EMI) programs. By adopting the concept of cooperative learning as the analytical lens, this study focuses on four key elements of group dynamics: positive interdependence, individual accountability, promotive interaction, and group processing. The data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews with 10 international students from various EMI programs at a Thai university. The findings reveal that the participants struggled to build a belief in positive interdependence, as recurring communication problems made it difficult for them to rely on their Thai peers. Moreover, because of language limitations, some Thai peers participated less actively and avoided taking responsibility in group tasks. As a result, this led to an uneven distribution of work and a sense of unfairness. In addition, emotional support and constructive feedback within groups were often limited or absent, as Thai students could not express themselves effectively in English. These findings highlight the urgent need for more effective cooperative learning strategies that can help international and local students work together more successfully in EMI settings.

Keywords: English-medium instruction, international students, limited English proficiency, cooperative learning, group work

Introduction

Over the past decade, many Thai universities have made considerable efforts to attract more international students to their campuses. These efforts are largely influenced by Thailand's national policy that aims to establish the country as a regional hub for higher education, especially within ASEAN (Chaiyasat, 2024; Jampaklay et al., 2022). At the same time, the declining birth rate, which resulted in fewer domestic students, has pushed Thai universities to rely more on international enrollments to sustain their operations (Pongsin et al., 2023). Apart from these main driving forces, other advantages, such as strengthening the international outlook and providing Thai students with opportunities to engage in intercultural learning experiences, also play crucial roles in motivating Thai universities to recruit more international students (Chaiyasat, 2024; Jampaklay et al., 2022).

To attract international students, Thai universities have adopted an important strategy: implementing English-medium instruction (EMI) programs, which are often called "international programs" (Chaiyasat, 2024; Galloway & Sahan, 2021; Jampaklay et al., 2022; Pongsin et al., 2023). According to a recent report by the British Council (2024), there are now over 768 international programs across the country. Most students enrolled in these programs are Thai, while international students still make up a smaller portion of the student body (Charoenpornsook & Thumvichit, 2025; Taylor et al., 2022; Thumvichit & Laoriandee, 2024). Although international students remain a minority, their numbers are expected to grow. According to the Office of Higher Education Commission (OHEC, 2025), 48,539 international students were enrolled in Thai higher education institutions in the 2024 academic year, including 25,880 at the bachelor's degree level. There has been a notable increase compared to the 2019 academic year, when the total number of international students across all higher education levels was 25,110 (OHEC, 2025). Most of these international students come from ASEAN countries and nearby Asian nations, such as China, Myanmar, Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos, Indonesia, South Korea, Nepal, and Bhutan.

With the growing number of international students in Thai universities, various studies have been carried out to explore the challenges that may prevent them from fully gaining the benefits of their academic experience. Among the various challenges they encounter, a significant issue that needs attention is the difficulty in participating in group work with Thai peers with limited English proficiency (Chaiyasat, 2020, 2024; Rhein & Jones, 2020). In recent educational practice, group work has become a fundamental component of classroom instruction at all levels of education (Griffiths et al., 2021; Johnson & Johnson, 2021; Yang, 2023). It is widely adopted with the aim of encouraging students to work together effectively to accomplish a shared goal. However, in group work where international students and local peers with limited English proficiency work together, past studies both in Thailand and other contexts have similarly reported that several challenges often arise (Chaiyasat, 2024; Chu et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2014; Rakhshandehroo & Ivanova, 2020; Rybo-LoPresti & Rhein, 2021; Yu & Wright, 2017).

One common issue is that local students often avoid interacting with international students because they feel shy or are afraid of making mistakes when using English (Chaiyasat, 2024; Chu et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2014; Lin, 2018; Rakhshandehroo & Ivanova, 2020; Sairattanain & Dawala Wilang, 2020). This greatly reduces opportunities for meaningful interaction and contributes to feelings of exclusion and isolation for international students. In addition to this, when communicating, both international and local students often need to clarify, explain, and negotiate to ensure mutual understanding (Chaiyasat, 2024; Kim et al., 2014; Kuteeva, 2020; Volchenkova & Al-Darraji, 2022). These processes sometimes lead to misunderstandings (Kuteeva, 2020) and can create tension within the group (Kim et al., 2014; Wang & Na Ranong, 2025). Apart from these challenges, some studies have pointed out that local students' language limitations can lead to an overdependence on international peers, especially in tasks that require proficient English skills, such as writing group reports or giving presentations (Itoi & Mizukura, 2024; Yu & Wright, 2017). This situation can put pressure on international students who do not feel confident in their language ability (Itoi & Mizukura, 2024). Some students may even feel they are being treated unfairly or taken advantage of (Yu & Wright, 2017).

Although previous studies have clearly shown how local peers' limited English proficiency affects the group work experiences of international students in EMI programs, most of these studies tend to emphasize the aspect of communication difficulties. In practice, effective group work involves more than just effective communication; it also depends on other important elements, including positive interdependence, individual accountability, promotive interaction, and group reflection on performance (Johnson & Johnson, 2021; Johnson et al., 2014). In other words, to work together effectively, members need to share common goals, recognize the value of their contributions to the group, take responsibility for their own tasks, provide encouragement and support to others, and reflect on feedback to improve overall group performance. However, in EMI programs where language can become a barrier, these crucial elements may be disrupted. Apart from this language barrier, other factors, such as classroom design and task structure (Donelan & Kear, 2024), differing group formation methods (Poort et al., 2022), and gaps in subject knowledge or skills (Hall & Buzwell, 2013), are also commonly recognized as making cooperation more difficult. Such factors may interact with language-related challenges within the EMI environment, potentially making effective collaboration more difficult for both international and local students.

Despite the importance of these elements and the impact language limitations can have on them, there remains a lack of in-depth research on this issue, especially within the context of EMI programs in Thailand. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by exploring how Thai students' limited English proficiency affects group work dynamics in the EMI context. Specifically, the study focuses on the perspectives of international students, who often represent a minority group in the classroom and whose voices are underrepresented in existing literature. By highlighting their experiences, this study seeks to

provide useful insights that can help improve the implementation of EMI programs to better address the needs of international students.

Research Question

How does the limited English proficiency of Thai peers impact group work dynamics in EMI programs, from the perspective of international students?

Research Objective

To explore how the limited English proficiency of Thai peers impacts group work dynamics in EMI programs from the perspective of international students.

Theoretical Framework

To understand how language barriers affect group work dynamics, this study uses the concept of cooperative learning proposed by Johnson and Johnson (2021) as its analytical framework. Johnson and Johnson (2021) defined cooperative learning as an instructional approach in which students work together in small groups to enhance both their own learning and that of their peers. This concept suits the nature of group work as reported by the international students in this study, in which they were often assigned to work in a small group of four to six members to accomplish tasks such as giving presentations, writing reports, and conducting research projects.

Grounded primarily in social interdependence theory, cooperative learning includes five key conditions that lead to successful group work: positive interdependence, individual accountability, promotive interaction, group processing, and appropriate use of social skills (Johnson & Johnson, 2021). Positive interdependence means that group members believe their success depends on each other. They are often tied by a shared goal, and they understand that working together is necessary to achieve their common goal. Individual accountability means that every student is responsible for their own part of the task. This prevents some students from doing all the work while others do nothing. Promotive interaction happens when group members help each other by sharing ideas, providing help, and encouraging one another. Group processing is when the group reflects on how well they worked together and finds ways to improve in the future. Finally, the use of appropriate social skills such as leadership, conflict resolution, and decision-making is important for facilitating smooth group work.

Applied as an analytical lens, cooperative learning provides a basis for understanding the interactional processes involved in group work in EMI contexts. It is particularly useful for considering how the use of English as a shared language may influence communication, participation, responsibility, and collaboration among group members.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design, using a semi-structured interview as the data collection method. This approach is suitable for the current study because it allows the researchers to explore participants' personal experiences in detail; at the same time, the participants can express their thoughts more freely, which helps reveal deeper insights into their group work experiences.

Context of the Study

This research was conducted at an autonomous public university located in a northern province of Thailand. The university employs English as the medium of instruction across the majority of its four-year undergraduate programs. According to the university records from January 2025, a total of 1,439 international students were enrolled. This number places the university among the top institutions in Thailand in terms of international student population. The majority of international students are Burmese, along with smaller groups such as Chinese, Bhutanese, Korean, and Indonesian students. International students are required to meet the university's minimum English proficiency threshold. Under the university's current undergraduate admission requirements, accepted forms of English proficiency evidence include IELTS (minimum 5.0), TOEFL iBT (minimum 35), TOEFL ITP (minimum 337), and TOEIC (minimum 400). Applicants who graduated from an English-medium school may alternatively provide a certificate confirming English as the medium of instruction.

Participants

The participants were 10 international students, all of whom were non-native English speakers. They were selected through two specific criteria. First, only international students enrolled in EMI programs were included. Second, participants had to be in at least their second year of study, as they had sufficient experience to reflect meaningfully on their learning experience. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling. The principal researcher first identified a small number of international students who met the sampling criteria through personal contacts within the university's international student community. These initial participants then referred other eligible students who might be interested in taking part. This process continued until 10 participants meeting the study's criteria had been recruited. These participants came from diverse academic disciplines, including Computer Engineering (n = 2), Software Engineering (n = 2), Business Administration (n = 1), Public Health (n = 2), Cosmetic Science (n = 2), and Environmental Health (n = 1).

At the time of the study, all participants reported that international students were a minority in their programs, as most of the students were Thai. Regarding participants' perceived English proficiency, a four-item self-rating scale developed by the research team was used, with one item assessing each of the four skills: reading, speaking, writing, and listening. Participants rated their

proficiency in each skill on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (very poor) to 5 (very good). The average scores indicate that they considered themselves proficient in English, as shown in Table 1. Moreover, all of them had previously studied through English-medium instruction, either in international programs or in EMI programs in their home countries. As these participants had previously graduated from English-medium or international programs, they were admitted through the relevant admission pathways and were not necessarily required to submit standardized English proficiency scores such as IELTS, TOEFL, or TOEIC. Table 1 presents participants' nationalities, years of study, and their average self-reported English ability across four skills.

Table 1.

Profile of the Participants

Participants	Nationality	Year of study	Average self-reported English ability across four skills
Student 1	Burmese	4	4.25
Student 2	Burmese	2	4.00
Student 3	Burmese	4	4.00
Student 4	Burmese	4	4.00
Student 5	Bhutanese	4	4.25
Student 6	Bhutanese	4	4.00
Student 7	Korean	3	3.75
Student 8	Korean	4	4.00
Student 9	Indonesian	2	4.25
Student 10	Indonesian	2	4.00

Research Instruments

Semi-structured Interviews

This study employed semi-structured interviews to collect the data. Initially, the research team carefully developed the interview questions to ensure they could elicit detailed and genuine responses from the participants. The guided questions included six key questions focusing on eliciting the participants' experiences studying in EMI programs. The full list of key guided interview questions is provided in the Appendix. To ensure validity, three experts in the field of English language teaching evaluated these questions using the Index of Item-Objective Congruence (IOC). All questions received scores higher than 0.60, indicating acceptable validity. Prior to the actual data collection, the interview

protocol was piloted with three international students majoring in English. Based on their feedback, some questions were revised to improve clarity and wording.

Data Collection and Data Analysis

The data were mainly collected in 2022 and 2023. During this period, eight participants took part in individual, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews. To include a wider range of international students' experiences, the other two students who met the recruitment criteria were later invited to join the study and were interviewed online in 2024. Prior to the interviews, all participants provided informed consent, which affirmed their voluntary involvement. Each interview was conducted in English by the principal researcher and lasted approximately 35 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded for later analysis. It should be noted that although data collection spanned three years (2022–2024), findings regarding group work format, the learning environment, and teaching context appeared to be consistent across this period, with participants' accounts in 2024 broadly aligning with those from 2022–2023. This suggests that the patterns identified were not confined to a specific time period.

Following data collection, the interview data were analyzed using the thematic analysis approach. Coding was initially conducted independently by the principal researcher and one team member, who each coded all 10 transcripts to generate initial codes without reference to a pre-existing framework. These initial codes were then grouped and organized according to Johnson and Johnson's (2021) cooperative learning framework to form candidate themes. Then, the two researchers subsequently met to compare and discuss their independently coded data. Disagreements in coding were resolved through discussion until consensus was reached, and overlapping codes were consolidated. Following this, the other two team members reviewed the candidate themes against the original transcripts, checking that each theme was adequately supported by corresponding participant quotes and suggesting refinements such as renaming or merging closely related themes. Finally, all four team members reviewed and confirmed the final themes together. Coding decisions and the rationale behind them were recorded in a shared coding log at each stage to maintain transparency in how the final themes were derived from the raw data.

Findings

This section first describes the group work context in which participants' experiences took place. Following this, the findings regarding the impact of Thai peers' limited English proficiency on group work dynamics are presented across three themes: (1) the limited English proficiency of Thai peers as a barrier to positive interdependence, (2) passive participation among Thai students and increased responsibility for international students, and (3) a lack of promotive interaction and group processing. These findings were connected to key elements of cooperative learning, including positive interdependence, individual accountability, promotive interaction, and group processing. However, the

fifth element, the appropriate use of social skills, such as leadership and conflict resolution, was not prominently reported by the participants. Therefore, it is not included in the present paper.

Group Work Context

Although participants came from different academic programs, their accounts revealed a broadly shared pattern in the nature and organization of group work. This shared pattern may partly reflect the composition of the sample, as the majority of participants (9 of 10) were enrolled in science-oriented programs, which often involve broadly similar group-based tasks such as lab work, technical reports, or joint presentations. All participants reported that group work occurred frequently within most courses, typically in classes of approximately 30 students. Group formation was similarly reported to involve self-selected groups of four to six members, with tasks carried out both during and outside class time. Since most students in the classes were Thai, all participants engaged in group work with Thai peers.

How groups actually formed emerged as a key factor shaping who international students ended up working with. Because group formation was left to students themselves, Thai students tended to form groups with classmates they were already familiar with. As international students sought to join groups, they had fewer options and often ended up working with Thai peers who were still available, many of whom had more limited English proficiency. As Student 8 shared:

> *"Most of the time, the lecturers just ask us to make our own groups, so Thai students usually stay together. International students have to work with whoever is left. And most of the Thai students we end up working with have limited English proficiency."*

Participants further noted that group membership tended to remain stable across multiple courses, with students often continuing to work with the same peers over successive semesters. This suggests that early group formation patterns could have lasting effects. International students placed with less proficient peers in one course often found themselves working with the same peers and facing similar communication challenges in subsequent courses as well. Student 1 explained:

> *"Most of the time, the groups are almost the same. Thai students who are close friends or who have good English already have their own group, and they usually stay together for different subjects. For me, it is difficult to join that group because they already know each other and have formed their group."*

Taken together, participants described group work as a frequent, self-selected activity in which international students had limited choice over who they worked with and often ended up working with Thai peers with limited English proficiency.

Limited English Proficiency of Thai Peers as a Barrier to Positive Interdependence

Participants similarly reported that they often worked in groups with Thai peers who had limited English proficiency. Notably, all participants characterized these peers' English difficulties in broadly similar ways. They reported that these peers had difficulty understanding spoken and written English and expressing their ideas clearly. They also noted that such peers often relied on other Thai students to relay or translate information rather than communicating directly with international students. As Student 1 shared:

> *"Some Thai students have very limited English proficiency. They struggle to communicate with us in English. Sometimes they don't understand what we are saying, and when they have an idea, they cannot explain it clearly in English. So, they usually ask another Thai student to translate or explain for them."*

Importantly, participants reported that working with these Thai peers often involved ongoing difficulties due to their limited English proficiency. All participants described experiencing such difficulties repeatedly throughout their studies. As Student 5 shared:

> *"In most of my group work from the first year to now, I always work with Thai friends who have very limited English proficiency. It is very challenging to work with them because they can't use English that well. Some really struggle with English."*

Interestingly, eight participants similarly noted that the limited English proficiency among Thai members often resulted in miscommunication, which in turn negatively impacted their group work performance. As Student 1 explained:

> *"When we discussed the group project, I asked my Thai peers if I should do this part or if I should do it like this. They just said, 'yes, yes,' but it turned out they didn't understand what I said. So, we made a mistake because of miscommunication. It's a big problem for me because I want our work to be perfect, but we just can't communicate with each other. This has happened to me many times, and I am quite upset."*

Because of Thai peers' language limitations, eight participants reported that they began to doubt whether their Thai peers could contribute effectively to the group, and they felt less confident that their cooperative effort would lead to success. As Student 3 noted:

> *"I have to recheck everything before we submit because I feel like I can't trust them. When they send me their parts, like when we write reports, I will check everything once again. Their writing always has a lot of grammar errors, and sometimes I don't even understand what they wrote. If we send it like that, we will fail."*

Moreover, although the participants who were in their third or fourth year acknowledged that their Thai classmates' English had improved slightly over the years of study, they felt that the improvement was insufficient for handling increasingly complex academic tasks in the senior year, such as research projects. As Student 8 shared:

> *"They are getting better. They have more confidence. Not that shy like when we first met. But for many projects in my third and fourth years, I still had many communication problems. The projects became more complicated, like doing research. Though their English has improved, like they know more vocabulary, I think it's still not enough to help them work with international students. It's still hard for them to express their ideas or discuss what they want. Honestly, I hope they can do better than this."*

Over time, the communication difficulties led international students to view group work as a tiring task full of difficulties, and less efficient. For four of the participants, this feeling became so strong that they said they would prefer to work alone if given the choice, even though they acknowledged that this was not usually possible. As Student 4 shared:

> *"If I can choose, I want to work alone. Once I asked the lecturer if I could do that, but she didn't allow it. I feel very tired when I have to work with Thai students. I mean, they are good friends, and they are smart, but because their English is not that good, we always have communication problems."*

Despite the recurring difficulties with Thai peers who had limited English proficiency, participants also reported having occasional opportunities to work with Thai peers who had stronger English proficiency. They described these experiences as less common but noticeably different, with group work generally proceeding more smoothly, as communication was easier, discussions were more productive, and they felt more confident in their peers' contributions. As Student 5 explained:

> *"I seldom work with Thai students who have high English proficiency because most of the time they already have their own groups. But when I do work with them, it is totally different. We can communicate easily, and we can exchange ideas and discuss things together. I feel like we can really work as a team."*

These contrasting experiences suggest that limited English proficiency was a particularly important factor underlying the communication and collaboration difficulties reported by international students, and consequently challenged the development of positive interdependence within the groups.

Passive Participation among Thai Students and Increased Responsibility for International Students

Eight participants reported that language difficulties among Thai members often led to unequal participation and responsibility within group work. In particular, six participants shared that they were often expected to take on leading roles in group tasks due to assumptions about their stronger English proficiency. Most commonly, these participants were asked to lead group presentations. Student 8 reflected on this repeated expectation:

> *"There are many times when I have to do everything because the presentation is in English and they are not good at English. Sometimes, I feel it's not fair because it's too much work for me. Sometimes, I feel tired of leading presentations. Like, again? It's always me who has to present the group work. Why me?"*

Besides leading presentations, they were also mainly responsible for editing and refining the group's written tasks. This proofreading task was often added after the group finished the main work, which made them feel overloaded. Student 10 explained:

> "*They think my English is better, so my friends always ask me to recheck their grammar and rewrite their sentences, and then we submit it. Sometimes, if I have a lot to study, this feels like a burden to me. I should have more time to focus on my own studies."*

Four participants also described experiences where Thai peers became passive group members due to their limited ability to communicate or contribute ideas in English. In such cases, international students were left to manage and assign tasks, while Thai students remained disengaged. As Student 7 observed:

> *"Some of my friends just do nothing. They can't use English, so they just keep quiet and just wait for me to assign. If I don't ask them, they will just keep silent and do nothing."*

Two participants also pointed out that the lack of contribution might be due to their Thai peers' fear of making mistakes that would lower the quality of group work because of their language limitations. Student 1 shared:

> *"Thai students don't really want to do the presentation. They're worried. They told me that if they make mistakes or can't answer questions, it will bring the group's score down. So, if the lecturers don't ask all members to give presentations, they just let me handle it. I can speak English more fluently, so I guess they feel it's better for the group that way."*

However, some participants also suggested that passive participation was not always simply a matter of language difficulty but could also reflect limited subject knowledge. As Student 2 explained:

> *"Sometimes Thai members go quiet because they don't really know what to do. They don't get the task, or they don't understand what we're studying. So, they can't really help the group, and they just stay quiet and go along with whatever we decide."*

Another participant similarly explained that limited English proficiency could make it more difficult for Thai students to keep up with the course content, which in turn could limit their ability to contribute to group work. As Student 1 observed:

> *"Since their English is limited, studying in English is already difficult for them. Some of them don't understand the content, so they are afraid to share their ideas and rely on me more to decide what to do."*

These findings suggest that differences in English proficiency were the primary driver of the imbalance in group responsibilities observed in this study, with some participants also pointing to gaps in content knowledge among Thai members as a related factor. Regardless of the underlying cause, the participants were often expected to take on leadership roles even though they were not always willing to do so. This caused feelings of frustration, as they felt overwhelmed by the responsibilities and emotionally drained. Moreover, they perceived the situation as unfair because the workload was not equally shared among the group members.

Lack of Promotive Interaction and Group Processing

All participants in this study reported a lack of both promotive interaction and group processing during group work with Thai peers. Concerning the lack of promotive interaction, many international students described group environments where interaction was minimal, and academic or emotional support among group members was largely absent. Several noted that their Thai peers rarely initiated conversations or offered help. Student 6 reflected:

"They don't really ask me what I think or if I need help. Everyone just does their own part and finishes it. This is because they don't want to talk with me in English. So, they just said 'good' or 'okay.' But it doesn't mean anything."

Thai students' avoidance of English often left international students working in isolation. As Student 5 explained:

"Sometimes we are in the same group, but it feels like I'm working alone. They talk in Thai, and when I try to join, they just say short things like 'okay' or 'yes.' I don't really feel like we are working together."

Others mentioned the absence of encouragement during tasks. As Student 9 described:

"Because of the language limitation, we don't really encourage each other that much. It's like everyone just stays quiet. Just do their own part. It would be nicer if we could have more conversations. Cheer each other more."

Moreover, the same communication gap also prevented group processing, the opportunity for team members to reflect on how effectively they worked together and identify areas for improvement. As Student 8 and Student 10 shared:

"After we finish, we don't talk about how we did it or what was good or not. It is like, 'Okay, done,' and leaves."
(Student 8)

"When I finish my part, no one checks it or gives any comment. They just put it together and submit. I feel like we are not helping each other, just doing our own things."
(Student 10)

Even when problems occurred, such as confusion over task division or miscommunication, group members made no effort to discuss or resolve them. Student 1 stated:

"We had some problems with who should do what, but we never talked about it. So next time, the same problem happened again."

These findings demonstrate clearly that language barriers not only limit overall communication but also affect important group processes that help the team work better together. Because Thai students

are reluctant to use English, there are fewer opportunities for real interaction and discussion among group members. This situation makes it difficult for the group to reflect on their work and improve their collaboration.

Discussion

The findings indicate that limited English proficiency among Thai peers created significant challenges for international students during group work in the EMI context examined in this study. Similar to earlier studies, the common difficulties reported in this study include communication avoidance (Chaiyasat, 2024; Chu et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2014; Lin, 2018; Rakhshandehroo & Ivanova, 2020; Wang & Na Ranong, 2025), miscommunication (Kuteeva, 2020), and overdependence on international students (Itoi & Mizukura, 2024; Yu & Wright, 2017). Importantly, the findings suggest that these difficulties were not present to the same extent in all group work involving Thai peers. Participants reported that working with Thai peers who had stronger English proficiency was noticeably different, with communication, idea exchange, and collaboration generally proceeding more smoothly. Thus, this finding suggests that English proficiency appears to be an important condition shaping the quality of interaction in EMI group work, particularly when there was a substantial difference in English proficiency between international and Thai students. Through the lens of cooperative learning, the current findings reveal that the limited English skills of Thai peers affect international students' experiences in a more profound way.

One of the most noticeable negative effects is that Thai peers' limited English proficiency diminishes international students' sense of positive interdependence. At the heart of cooperative learning, group work is most effective when all members share a common goal and recognize that their success depends on the contributions of others (Johnson & Johnson, 2021). It is this sense of positive interdependence that motivates each member to put in effort and support others in achieving shared goals. However, in this study, although both international and Thai students shared the same goal of accomplishing the group work, international students tended not to believe that their success was linked to their Thai peers' contributions. From the findings, the ongoing and unresolved communication difficulties stemmed from Thai students' language limitations, leading international students to doubt their Thai peers' ability to contribute effectively. Over time, rather than seeing group work as beneficial, they perceived it as risky and demanding. As their positive interdependence is weakened, they may feel compelled to rely solely on themselves and develop negative attitudes toward group work (Johnson & Johnson, 2021; Johnson et al., 2014). While previous studies have highlighted communication difficulties in EMI group work (Chaiyasat, 2024; Chu et al., 2018; Itoi & Mizukura, 2024; Yu & Wright, 2017), the present finding extends this literature by suggesting that persistent communication difficulties may also shape how international students perceive their interdependence with other group members.

In addition to issues of positive interdependence, the study also raises concerns about the students' perceptions of individual accountability in EMI group work. In a well-functioning group, every member should understand that their contribution is essential and take responsibility for their part (Johnson et al., 2014). This strong sense of individual accountability, in turn, helps prevent any member from relying passively on others (Johnson & Johnson, 2021). In contrast, the current findings reveal a different pattern. Because of their language limitations, some Thai students may feel that their contributions carry little value, while some may worry that their poor language could slow the group down or reduce the quality of work. As a result, they tended to disengage, avoid responsibility, or wait for more proficient peers, like international students, to take the lead. This reduced sense of accountability affects group balance and leaves international students to manage more than their fair share of the workload (Yu & Wright, 2017). This situation, in turn, weakened group dynamics and resulted in frustration and fatigue among international members. This finding echoes previous research describing this pattern as overdependence on more proficient peers (Itoi & Mizukura, 2024; Yu & Wright, 2017). However, this overdependence is not simply a matter of relying on others; it reflects a weakening of individual accountability, suggesting that language limitations in EMI group work can undermine students' basic sense of responsibility for their own contribution.

Furthermore, the findings reveal a lack of effective communication in both aspects of promotive interaction and group processing. Cooperative learning emphasizes that students learn best through active interaction with their peers by exchanging ideas, challenging each other's thinking, co-constructing knowledge, and offering support and feedback that foster individual growth (Johnson et al., 2014). However, all participants reported that such interaction was minimal. Encouragement and feedback from Thai peers were rare, and group processing – where members reflect on their teamwork for improvement – was largely absent. This lack of engagement could be largely attributed to their Thai peers' inability or unwillingness to communicate in English (Chaiyasat, 2024; Sairattanain & Dawala Wilang, 2020). When interaction was limited, both groups of students missed opportunities to develop essential interpersonal and collaborative skills, such as leadership, negotiation, and conflict resolution (Johnson & Johnson, 2021). This may explain why the appropriate use of social skills was not prominently reported in participants' accounts. While previous studies have generally described reduced communication in EMI group work as a consequence of language barriers (Chaiyasat, 2024; Chu et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2014; Lin, 2018; Rakhshandehroo & Ivanova, 2020; Wang & Na Ranong, 2025), the present findings suggest that limited English proficiency may have broader effects on various interactional processes and skills needed for effective cooperation.

Although limited English proficiency emerged as a central factor shaping international students' experiences, the findings also revealed two additional factors that may have contributed to the group dynamics observed in this study. The first is the self-selected nature of group formation. Across different academic programs, participants described a recurring pattern in which Thai students often formed groups among themselves, possibly because they could communicate and coordinate more

easily in Thai. This pattern may have limited international students' opportunities to work with Thai peers with varying levels of English proficiency. As a result, international students often became stuck working with the same limited-proficiency peers across multiple courses, which led to ongoing, unresolved difficulties. The second concerns limited subject knowledge among Thai peers. Some participants suggested that certain Thai peers' reduced contribution may have stemmed from insufficient subject knowledge, which may have limited their ability to contribute to group tasks, potentially leading to weaker individual accountability. This interpretation is consistent with research showing that non-contribution in group projects is not always attributable to apathy or deliberate free-riding; limited knowledge or skills can also lead students to contribute less, even when they are willing to participate (Hall & Buzwell, 2013). Apart from these factors, group work dynamics can also be influenced by other factors, such as classroom design, task structure, and students' individual learning styles (Donelan & Kear, 2024; Poort et al., 2022). For example, Thai students have often been described as cautious in communication, concerned with maintaining harmony, and less inclined toward open negotiation, which may influence how they participate and interact in groups (Rhein & Jones, 2020; Rybo-LoPresti & Rhein, 2021).

Taken together, these observations suggest that limited English proficiency among Thai peers was a central factor shaping international students' group work experiences, while self-selected grouping and gaps in content knowledge may have further contributed to the group dynamics observed in this study. These factors may also interact with broader contextual influences, such as classroom design, task structure, and students' communication practices.

Conclusion

The findings of this study contribute to existing literature by illustrating the multifaceted difficulties international students encounter in EMI settings, where local peers' language limitations not only hinder communication but also disrupt essential group processes. From a theoretical perspective, cooperative learning does not require group members to have equal abilities; however, this study suggests that substantial differences in English proficiency can go beyond simply making communication harder. They can weaken the underlying conditions that group work depends on, such as members' belief that their success is linked to others' contributions, their sense of responsibility for their own part, and their opportunities to build the interpersonal skills that group work requires. In this sense, this does not mean that group work in EMI settings is bound to fail, but rather that its success cannot simply be assumed. Its application in EMI contexts may need to pay closer attention to how gaps in English proficiency affect whether cooperation actually works as intended.

This study calls for greater support for both groups of students in developing not only language skills but also other key skills that are necessary for group collaboration, such as negotiation and conflict resolution. In practical terms, the findings suggest several areas that may warrant attention. First,

instructors may consider using more structured group-formation practices to increase international students' opportunities to work with Thai peers across different levels of English proficiency. Second, all students should be equipped with the English communication skills needed for effective group work, including explaining ideas, asking for clarification, giving feedback, negotiating, and coordinating tasks, so that they can participate more actively and share responsibility more equally. Third, instructors may need to provide clearer task structures and role expectations to support individual accountability and reduce the tendency for more proficient students to assume a disproportionate share of the work. Where appropriate, brief opportunities for group processing could also help students reflect on their participation, communication, and coordination. Finally, instructors should be attentive to the role of disciplinary content knowledge and task demands as reduced participation may not always result from language proficiency alone.

Despite these valuable insights, this study has several limitations. One is that the study draws on a small sample of international students from a single university; therefore, the findings may not be generalizable to other EMI settings since the nature of EMI programs tends to be fluid and highly context-dependent. Additionally, as all participants were those who considered themselves to have high English proficiency, the findings of this study may not represent the experiences of international students with lower English proficiency. This study also did not systematically examine whether interaction quality varied across academic disciplines, year of study, or task type, which may have further shaped participants' experiences. Future research should include larger, more diverse samples from different EMI programs and consider examining whether interaction quality varies systematically across academic disciplines, year of study, or task type.

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Appendix

Guided Interview Questions

1. Could you describe the group work you've done in your program so far — how often it happens and the kinds of tasks it usually involves?
2. How would you describe the English proficiency of the Thai peers you've typically worked with in group work?
3. Stepping back across your experiences, how would you describe the overall effect your Thai peers' English proficiency has had on your group work?
4. How does your Thai peers' English proficiency affect how much you feel your group's success depends on everyone working together?
5. How do you and your group members usually divide up tasks and responsibilities?
6. How do members in your group support, encourage, or reflect with each other — both during the task and after it's done?