

Students' Attitudes towards Collaborative Learning in Language Classroom

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Abstract

Collaborative learning has been adopted as a teaching technique in ESL classes in the last three decades. Teachers use CL based on recommendations of researchers and linguists who wrote very positive feedback on it. Students' attitudes and feedback to collaborative learning, i.e. group work, are highly crucial to determine an aspect of success in the teaching-learning process. This research is an attempt to investigate the attitudes of students towards group work activities they perform in English language lessons. The research used mixed method approach to gain more comprehensive insights from high school students in an American curriculum school in Dubai. The findings generally showed that students have positive attitudes towards collaborative learning activities in the classroom

Keywords collaborative learning, language acquisition, sociocultural theory, students' attitudes

1. Introduction

Collaborative learning is a term that can be used interchangeably with cooperative learning as well as group work (Ha Le & Wubbels 2018; Clark et al. 2007; Nunan 1992). Groupwork is part and parcel of collaborative learning and the term is still being used in some research (Pica & Doughty, 1985; Flowerdew, 1998; Melles 2004; Chen and Hird 2006; Jiang 2009) and it is used to indicate CL as an umbrella for such instructional techniques. It is worth mentioning also that the researcher in this study used the term group work to indicate collaborative learning and most importantly to accommodate the academic jargon to make it easy for students to understand questions in interviews and surveys conducted to support the study.

Gokhale (1995, p. 22) defines CL as "an instructional method in which students at various performance levels work together in small groups toward a common goal". In general, it indicates the process of assigning students into different groups with academic tasks to accomplish within a given time frame; this process serves as a classroom activity that language teachers use to enhance students' interaction and limit the teacher role in class to a more effective facilitator rather than a knowledge transmitter in a traditional language classroom.

Kagan (1994) emphasizes that there are five main components that enhance group work and they are positive interdependence that guarantees the success of all members who depend on one another in the group, individual accountability in which each member feels responsible, equal participation in which members share work equally, simultaneous interaction in which students' responses provide feedback, and group processing in which students can develop leadership and communication skills.

The study is significant because the perspectives of the students towards classroom practices and techniques implemented by teachers are very valuable but not really highlighted or taken into consideration; investigating the students' attitudes towards groupwork may show a trend in some learners that are not engaged in such cooperative learning environment and therefore their individual learning preference should be catered for. The research aims to find out if students really prefer collaborative learning.

1.1. Research Aim

The present study aims to find out students' attitudes towards groupwork or collaborative learning. The guiding research question is: Do students have positive or negative attitudes towards working in groups in language classes?

2. Theoretical Framework

One of the main theoretical frameworks that needs to be mentioned here is Vygotsky's sociocultural Theory SCT which stresses the inherent nature of learning as a social process depending on the Zone of Proximal development that involves the interaction with a more advanced learner/peer (or a teacher) in a social learning context. Vygotsky defines ZPD as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1981). Social interaction is viewed as a prerequisite for the growth and development of cognition (Donato & McCormick, 1994), the physical tools that help human interaction cannot be separated from the social environment in which it is carried out (Wertsch 1993). In other words, mental functions are "intertwined with sociocultural determined factors" (Van Lier, 1995).

Vygotsky et al. (1978) believe that learning is first mediated on a social level between a child and other people in his or her environment, and then this learning is internalized by the child on an individual level. Secondly, learning on the social level often involves mentoring provided by more knowledgeable persons, either by adults or peers, who engage in activity with less experienced persons in a process of guidance or collaboration. To exhilarate learning to process from the social to the individual level, language serves as a psychological tool to adjust objects, others, and oneself in organizing functions that are crucial to cognitive activity.

The distance between student's actual level and their potential level marks the progress and attainment of their learning through working with more knowledgeable peers who can provide less able students with different ideas and creative solutions and various techniques to process thinking and production of output especially in a language context. Accordingly, students who are less able feel more confident working with more able students; they develop their level naturally and use this sense of positive interdependence to reach next level in the learning and achieving academic objectives set by teachers.

Another important framework of CL is second language acquisition; the theories introduced in SLA literature stress the importance of CL in the process of second language learning. Among these theories are the Input Hypothesis by (Oller & Krashen, 1988) and the Output Hypothesis by Swain (Swain & Lapkin, 1995). Both theories suggest that learners during group work exchange a great amount of comprehensible input and output which serve their language acquisition.

Ghaith and Yaghi (1998) also found that CL enriches the language classroom with comprehensible input as well as promoting frequent and communicative classroom talk in a supportive environment. Generally, many SLA experts believe that the interactive nature of groupwork boosts learners' ability to reach a higher level of language acquisition and proficiency due to the fact that learners exchange input and output in a friendly social setting and sometimes temporarily away from teachers' interference.

The motivational nature of CL is also of great importance and it helps make groupwork a successful teaching practice in SLA. Rossiter and Dornyei (2001) further note that, groupwork contexts students learn to work with their peers and accordingly the learning responsibility is shared among learners. Unlike the traditional classroom in which a competitive atmosphere is prevalent students are praised and rewarded as a team working together with the same work spirit and sense of achievement. Students can also work wholeheartedly in the group because of their cohesive ties. Johnson et al. (1994) explain that group cohesiveness is an index of the level of group development, and it determines peer interaction, which in turn determines the learning outcomes. Slavin (2014) further indicates that cohesiveness of groups increases their productivity level.

Dornyei (1994) therefore views groupwork or collaborative learning in general as an efficient means of

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building teams with a high sense of self evaluation. Students turn into independent learners who can control their learning experiences and processes.

3. Literature Review

There are two studies under scrutiny in this section: the first is a one-year investigation into the teaching of English through collaborative learning and groupwork activities in Hong Kong secondary school classrooms (Sachs, Candlin & Rose, 2003). The second study looked at in relation to students' attitudes towards groupwork was conducted in 2013 in a Spanish ESL class (Fernández, Dobao & Blum, 2013).

3.1 *The First Study (Hong Kong, 2003)*

The 520 student candidates, belonging to different English language levels, were from three local secondary schools. Students were taught in English which was the language of instruction in addition to the mother tongue, Cantonese. Students discipline problems and lack of motivation were evidently present in the secondary school that had the lowest language proficiency level. On the other hand, there were no evident similar problems in the other two schools and students had proficiency levels ranging between average and advanced; in other words, speaking English was a common daily class practice.

The number of participating teachers is eight, and six of them have literature degrees from universities while only two had teachers training certificates. All the teachers have more than 3 years' experience and some of them have a round 8 years.

Launching the Project

The researchers started the project by giving professional development training to the school teachers on cooperative language learning and groupwork to make teachers get used to organizing their classes conducting related activities in smooth manners. The workshops include introducing the meaning and techniques of cooperative learning in language, task based learning, class groupwork observation, and sharing groupwork in addition to reporting to ease the flow of data collections.

3.1.1 *Materials Design*

The research team utilized the schools' workbooks and syllabuses to design tasks based on cooperative learning activities. Tasks are given to teachers to use in class and teachers, in their turn, independently design their own tasks at a later stage and use them on weekly basis together with the tasks given by researchers.

3.1.2 *Feedback and Discussion*

The results of the pre-test and the post-test gave clear results. The group which was introduced to cooperative learning and groupwork did not outperform the group which did not. The researchers indicate that results don't necessarily compare traditional language teaching to cooperative learning and therefore the results should be interpreted with reservation and caution.

Students' Feedback on Cooperative Language Learning

Through class observation, the researchers reported that students feel happy and more interested in learning English in such a new way. Students feel free and more relaxed in working with their peers. They enjoyed their group discussions even if they must deal with difficult tasks or questions. Students comments also give positive insights especially from high achievers who find a good chance in such activities to work on tasks based on their level(challenging). Unfortunately, in traditional language classes, high achievers do not get the chance of meeting challenges; teachers tend to focus on low achievers and average achievers. On the other hand, low achievers have very good chances of exposure to more able peers and they communicate more often, unlike the case in traditional language classroom. So all in all, both low achievers and high achievers find groupwork activities to be very useful and entertaining while they are learning.

In 1999, the project was completed and the researcher conducted series of interviews with the same eight teachers to collect more accurate feedback on the experiment. Interviews were mainly about the degree of usefulness of cooperative learning and the limitations or negative aspects of using this approach in the Hong Kong classroom context. Most of the teachers reported that groupwork is very useful and engaging to students. They also supported the fact that both, more able students as well as less able students, benefited from these cooperative learning activities because they had more opportunities to use the language interactively with peers who could help them with thinking processes, decision making, and error correction. However, teachers also mentioned some of the negative aspects or limitations they faced during cooperative learning activities. First, weak students do not have enough proficiency to communicate with peers during group discussions. Second, the tight schedules and the limited teaching time in class as they noticed that groupwork activities are time consuming. The latter could be viewed as the reason for teacher's reluctance to use groupwork activities.

The project is considered a very brave experiment to challenge both teachers and students to get out of their academic comfort zone and try a new approach that is both engaging and beneficial in terms of language teaching and learning. Both teachers and students have been accustomed to the traditional classroom in which a teacher is a knowledge giver and the students is a passive knowledge receiver.

3.2 The Second Study (Spain ,2013)

The second study looked at in relation to students' attitudes towards groupwork was conducted in 2013 in A Spanish ESL class. The study was done using a collaborative writing task in which 55 Spanish learners of English were divided to have 50% working on the task in pairs and the other 50% to work in groups. The students were given a post task questionnaire (Fernández Dobao & Blum, 2013).

Students' attitudes in general were very positive and they reported many benefits for learning in such a collaborative activity. Most of the positive comments and responses revolved around students given more opportunities to practice language and participate more in discussions (pair work) and around students given more ideas and knowledge by their peers. Overall students were very engaged and positive about their learning collaborative task and only 4 students reported they preferred to work individually on the writing task.

4. Research Methods

The research adopted the mixed method approach as it used a survey and interviews to gain more insights about the students' attitudes towards collaborative learning.

4.1 Setting:

The research study was conducted in an American curriculum school in Dubai, Al Garhoud area in March 2017. The school offers the Common Core Standards to all grade levels from KG to grade 12 who, then obtain a high school diploma to enroll in university. The school has an American system of elective courses among which students of high school especially grade 12 study various courses to enable them enroll in different university majors. The school permission was obtained to conduct the study as well as permission from parents. Students also were very excited to participate in this study because of the interesting topic that relates to their daily academic life.

4.2 Participants

The participants in this study were students in grade 12 in the above-mentioned school; the number of students who participated in the survey were 56 students from different classes. Students study various majors like biology, media, advertising finance, accounting, and physics. Participants were aware of group work activities as they were used to be assigned in groups during their English classes in particular as well as other subjects in general. The interviews were conducted with many students who come from different classes, mainly girl's sections. The interviews were also conducted with some English teachers who in turn

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use collaborative learning or groupwork activities in their classrooms. The teachers participating in the interview stage had been teaching for many years and they are quite experienced teachers in the field.

4.3 Research Tools:

The study was conducted in class rooms in the school premises. The researcher used a Sony Voice recorder (IC recorder) that has a capacity to record up to 90 minutes to conduct semi-structured interviews. The voice recorder has a built-in memory card that can transfer audio files to computers through USB ports. The researcher also used a survey on groupwork that was conducted through a Smart Learning Platform (Frog O.S.) used by the School's teachers, students, and administration. The survey had six questions written in simple and direct language to make it accessible to students to respond spontaneously and quickly. The survey was designed by the researcher and results are automatically generated by the Frog Drive. The Frog Drive was installed on all students' laptops and they had their user names and passwords to access material sent to them by teachers. It was easy and smooth for students to take the survey and submit their answers. The smart Learning Platform provided built in poll tools that provide numbers and statistics of surveys. The above-mentioned tools are very practical, reliable and easy to use and the researcher decided to use them to maintain the highest possible level of smoothness, validity, and accuracy.

4.4 Data Collection

Students interviews were recorded and transcribed to make it easy for the researcher to follow up and trace participants' choice of words and tones expressing their attitudes towards groupwork. As for the survey, results were automatically generated through the Smart Learning Platform, Frog O.S. (Frog Drive) and they were easy to interpret and analyze.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1. Students Survey

The survey results were clearly indicative and were considerably positive in favor of group work. Students showed very positive attitudes towards group work. Approximately 58% of the students stated that group work was always used by their teacher while around 45 % stated that group work was sometimes used in class. Over all the high percentages received in response to this survey question (figures 1) reflect that students were used to group work that was regularly assigned by their teacher. Therefore, a high degree of familiarity with the survey topic was established and this involved more focused answers and results.

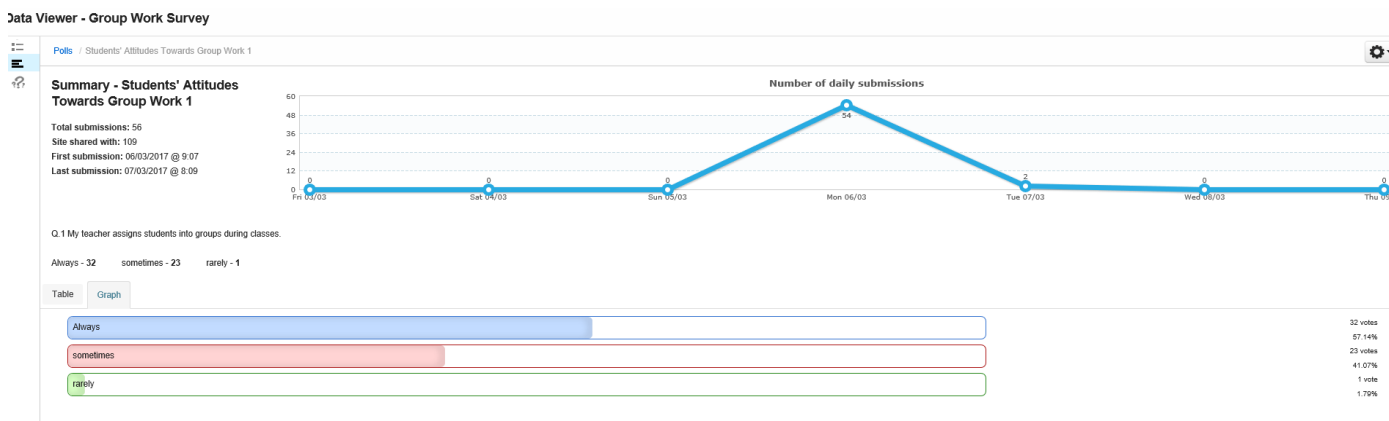


Figure 3 The frequency of using group work in class

The second survey question was among the most important indicators of students' attitudes towards groupwork as it examined the level of enjoyment students undergo during working in a group.

Approximately 70% of participants confirmed they enjoy working in a group, 21 % do not know specifically, and only 9% have negative attitudes towards group work (figure 2). It can safely be stated that group work activities were highly enjoyed by most students in the study

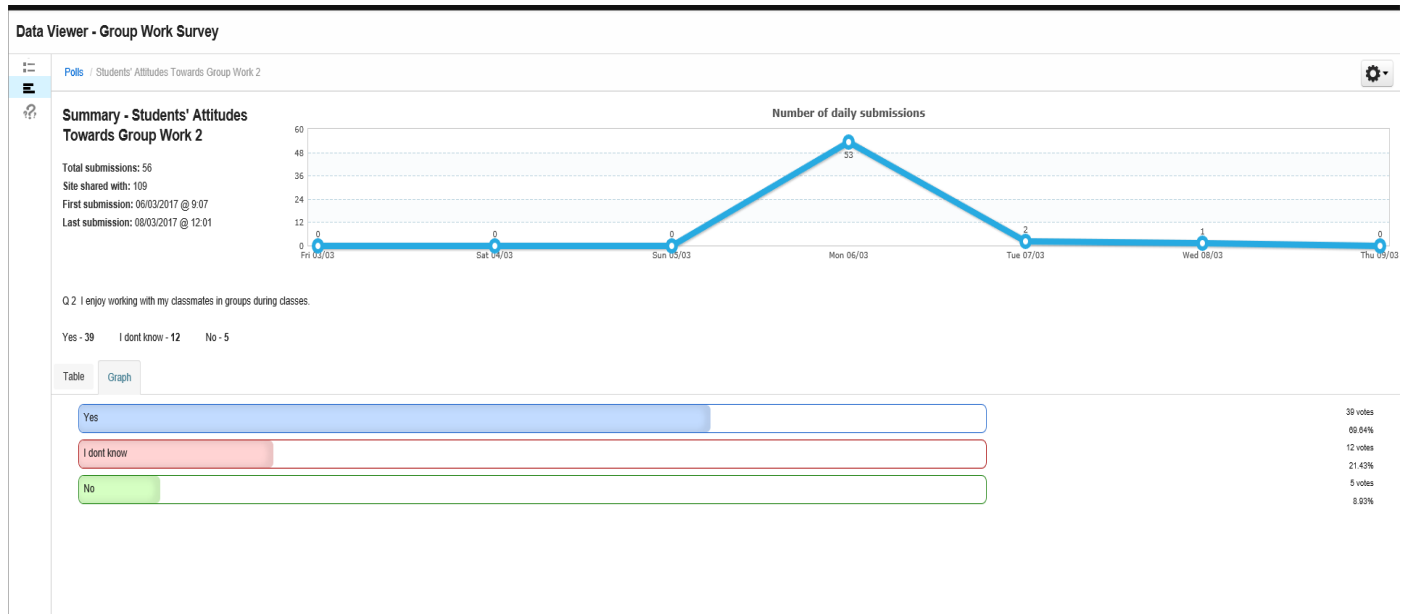
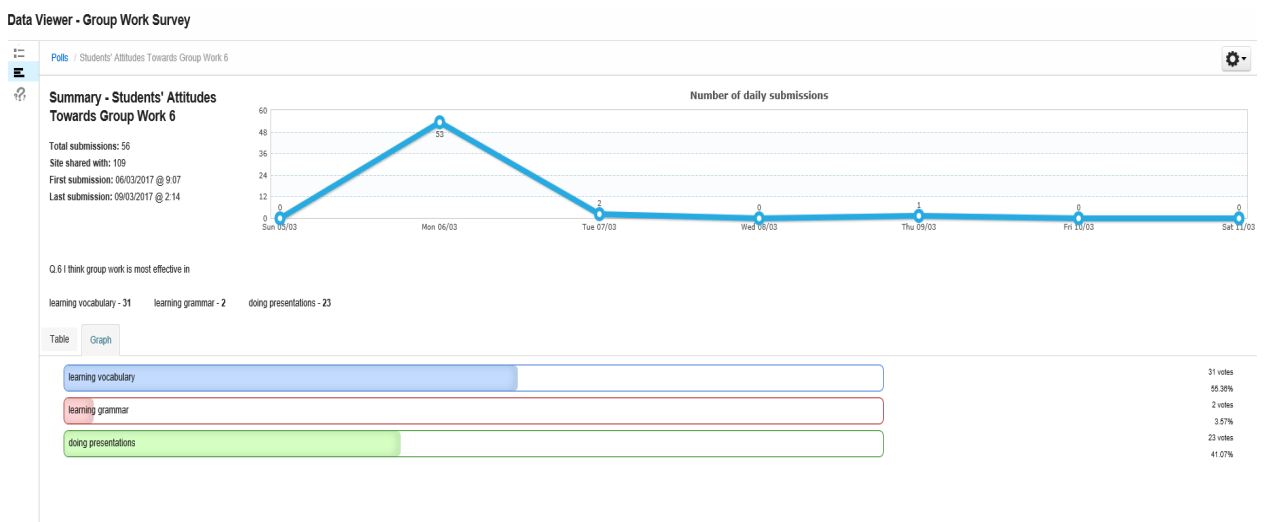


Figure 4 The level of enjoying groupwork in classroom

The third question was another major indicator as it asked students about the usefulness and of groupwork (figure 3). Almost 60% of the participants viewed groupwork as helpful to their learning while only 7% saw the opposite (unhelpful). Surprisingly 33% did not give a specific answer and chose the "I do not know" choice. Possibly, those students who were undecided regarding this question were those who just abided by the rules and do groupwork as they were instructed and accordingly they performed tasks without understanding the objectives underpinning them or reflecting on the benefits of such tasks.



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Figure 5 The usefulness of groupwork in class

The fourth survey question examined the social aspect of groupwork as it asked students about getting along with peer/team members. Around 90% of the participants positively confirmed that they got along easily with other team members. Only 10 % of the participants were negative about the social aspect of learning in a group (figure 4). Again, here we can safely conclude that an overwhelming majority of students/participants enjoyed the social aspect of bonding with team members (bonding with team members is one key skill that underpins the use of collaboration learning. It is worth-mentioning here that collaboration and communication are among the top 21st century skills to be obtained by students.

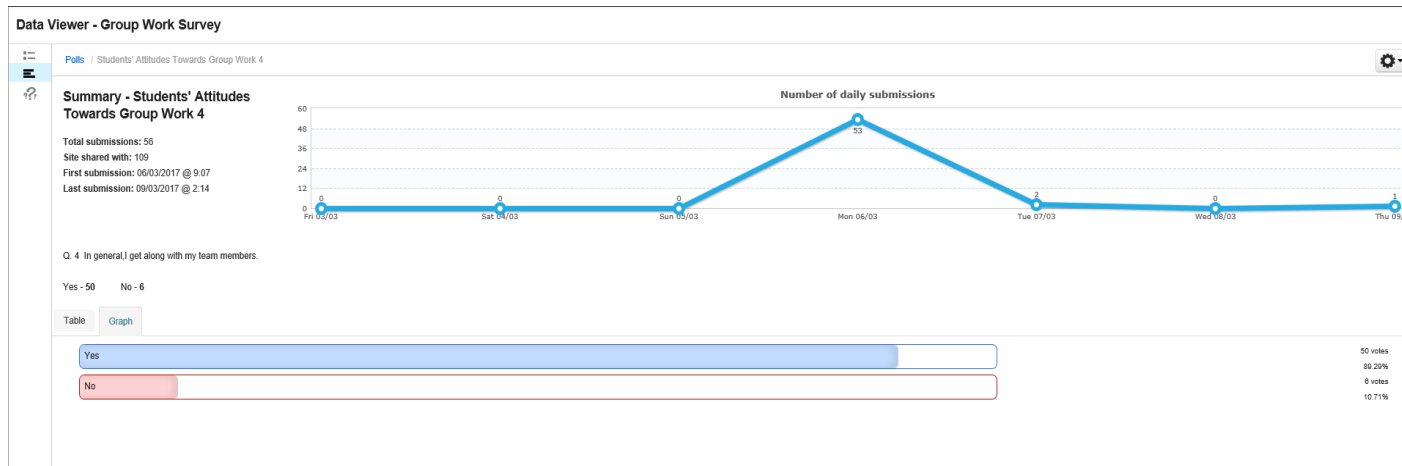


Figure 6 The social interaction among students

The fifth survey question was another major indicator and essential in determining the positive attitude of students towards learning fast in a group; the question subtly and indirectly compared collaborative learning to the individual traditional teaching method. Approximately 45% of participants believe that they learn faster and grasp information easier when they work collaboratively. Around 29% of the participants believed they do not learn faster in groups. Surprisingly around 27% of the participants stood on the fence by choosing the “I do not know” choice.

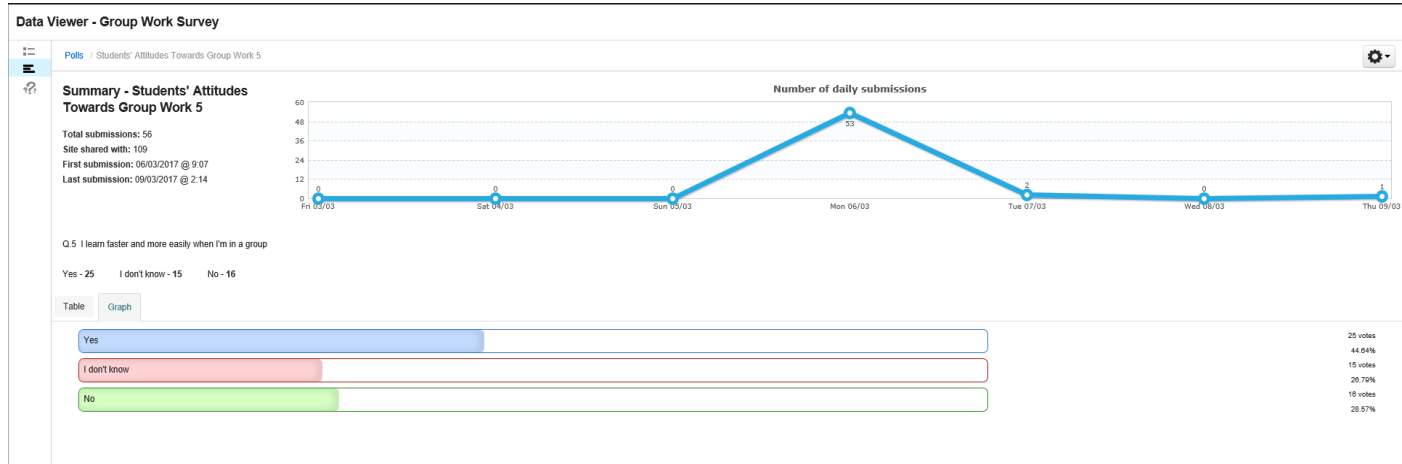


Figure 7 Learning fast in a group

The last question examined the areas that students prefer to collaboratively work in. 55% of students choose learning vocabulary using groupwork while around 42 % prefer to do group presentations. Grammar took the least of choices and preferences with 4% only (figure 6). As a disclaimer in this question, it is worth-mentioning that students mainly work in groups on vocabulary lessons as well as presentation; grammar lessons have not been approached or introduced by the teacher in groups throughout this academic year.

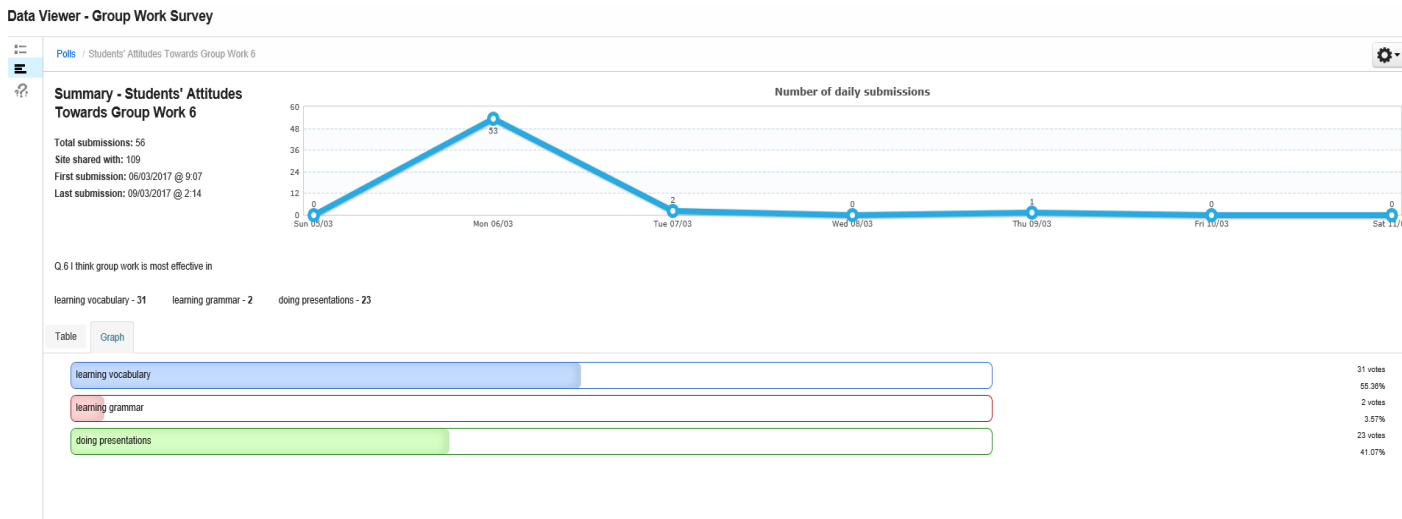


Figure 8 The areas of preference for activities in groupwork

5.2 Interviews

The interviews conducted with students as well as some teachers prove the same positive attitude of students towards collaborative learning. A few students are interviewed and most of them believe that group work is very useful and beneficial for students; they indicated that they learn better in a group and that learning is much fun when it is done collaboratively. A female student participant in 12A says “Yes definitely. I work best when I’m around my friends. I think it’s really beneficial for me and it brings out the best in me so I work most efficiently when I’m around my friends”.

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Another student participant 'B', passionately says", I definitely enjoy groupwork because, for me, when I work alone, I feel like... Now when everyone works alone, everyone has his/her own job. When working in groups, it's like you share many ideas together and you're more creative".

One student's interview comes as an individual exception to the unanimous approval and general positive attitude of participants towards groupwork. Participant C, says" I don't think its beneficial at some point because as I said they(students) take advantage of it so they start just slacking off and they don't work at all and they just depend on other classmates to just work while they just watch and so I think just some people work and the others just watch so they take the credit for nothing."

A few teachers have also been interviewed and all of them have very positive attitudes towards collaborative learning. A Middle School English Teacher said, "Well, groupwork is done in classrooms or at home depending where/when its assigned for different subjects. For us, in the English department, we do it according to different skills. I found it effective- especially for the reading skills because students like work together, cooperate, help each other, different skills and the outcome will be really beneficial for the students as well as for the teachers. "

5.3. Summary of Findings

In general, participants are used to collaborative learning activities in their classrooms; the percentages of students conducting groupwork support this finding. One of the main findings in this study is that majority of students enjoy groupwork and believe it is "fun" to learn this way with your classmates while developing social bonds and a spirit of teamwork (second findings which helps accomplish the task at hand. Presumably, the second finding leads to the third one which is related to the usefulness of collaborative learning activities according to students'; the majority of the participants viewed groupwork as an effective learning tool. The same vision is shared by teachers who have been interviewed who confirmed that cooperative learning is a powerful teaching technique in language classroom. The interviews correspondingly showed a highly positive attitude of participants towards groupwork. The audio recordings clearly support this conclusion based on participants' word choices that have positive connotations like "beneficial", "work best in a group", "brings the best out in me" and "more creative". Similarly, students' tones are clearly passionate and positive when they are asked about groupwork.

6. Possible Limitations

A possible limitation was that the study is conducted on 56 students out of a total of 100 because of errors on the system of smart learning that made it difficult to the rest of students to participate; It is also worth-mentioning that no male participant takes part the interviewing stage. In future studies the researcher will make sure to conduct similar studies among more students and to involve more male students in the interviews to gain more insights on both genders' attitudes regarding groupwork activities.

7. Recommendation and Conclusion

Teachers should consider/continue using collaborative learning activities in language classrooms. Most of the students have good perceptions of such group activities and they indirectly learn while having fun and social satisfaction. Teachers should increase the allocation of activities in a collaborative learning environment rather than a traditional class environment of passive individual receivers; a teacher should act as a guide on the side not as a sage on the stage. However, the researcher believes that it may be also useful to incorporate some tasks to be done on individual basis to keep engaging the minority of students who have negative views and attitudes of groupwork. Teachers are also advised to monitor group activities or even joining some of the groups during actual activities to facilitate and assures the success of team members who may get distracted in some cases. Including collaborative learning activities in the curricula and lessons plans is a must to cope with fast evolving teaching techniques nowadays. One last recommendation is to train students on how to manage the time during such groupwork activities as time management is a key factor for success in the activity at hand and in life in general.

Collaborative Learning or groupwork is a technique deeply rooted in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and plays a major role in second language acquisition. CL involves students working together to achieve an assigned task through which they show cooperation, work division, responsibility, and commitment. Literature written regarding students' progress and acceptance indicated positive attitudes in general. The research study conducted proves a substantially positive attitude of students and teachers regarding the use of groupwork. The researcher recommends using timely managed collaborative learning activities in English language classrooms, yet to some extent individual based activities should be incorporated in order to accommodate other students who have negative views and attitudes towards working with classmates in groups and those who prefer to work individually.

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