A STUDY ON KURDISH STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TO GROUP WORK IN THE EFL CLASSROOM

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Abstract

Throughout the last two or three decades, group work has become a part that cannot be separated from other classroom activities. This research study identifies the different opinions of Kurdish students concerning the advantages and disadvantages of group work in the classroom. The research was conducted on 100 Kurdish university students who had at least two years experience of group work at Universities in Kurdistan (Zakho, Dohuk, Salahaddin, and Sulaimani universities). Anonymously, a questionnaire was completed and its results were submitted by the respondents, hoping that their responses could directly address the research aim. Then, 20 students from the ones who participated in filling in the questionnaire were chosen and interviewed so as to gain as valid and reliable data as possible for the results of the study to be authentic. Thus, a triangulation methodological strategy was followed in this research study to produce valid results.

The findings from both instruments revealed that "better communication", "group work is a mutual interest", "group members clarify difficult things to each other" and "it takes a short time to finish a task in group work" were students' positive opinions, while "some members prefer to relax and stay silent", "some members do not like to work", "group work is a waste of time as students talk about external things and they cannot reach any agreement' 'and "students depend on each other" were their negative opinions concerning group work. Suggesting further considerable studies on attitudes of students concerning group work, the research concludes.

Keywords: Group work, communication, task, university students, EFL classrooms.

1. Introduction

It is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore the significance of group work in the classroom, because of its real influence on the students' language learning. The popularity of group work in teaching has been beyond the reasonable doubt for many years (Harmer, 2011). Petty (2001) states that a good understanding between students and an encouraging student-centered confidential atmosphere can be created inside the class with the existence of group work.

Since it is regarded as an important technique in teaching, Scrivener (2005) lists speaking growth, collaboration ability and some other points as the advantages of group work for students. As it can be understood from the above studies, the benefits of group work for students in the classroom are clear. Despite its explicitness, the previous research is "theoretical" i.e. Harmer has not highlighted his primary research. So, it is unclear and open to question how much of his research reflects true opinions of students. In other words, a little attention has been paid to the real attitudes of the students especially the international ones who study English as a second or foreign language to find out their ideas about group work. In fact, many studies have presented positive attitudes of specialists (professional teachers) concerning group work inside the classroom such as (Harmer 2007; Suwantarathip and Wichadee 2010; Porto, 2001). However, as mentioned above the quantity of the real attitudes of the students is somehow unclear.

This paper falls into eight sections. The first section provides an introduction to the topic of the current research. It also identifies a gap in research concerning international students' attitudes towards group work in the classroom. Section two highlights the value and contributions of the current study. The third section is devoted to discuss the literature related to group work. The fourth section introduces the research objectives. Section five discusses the methodology followed in conducting the current research paper. Section six presents the results reached in the current study. The discussion of the results of this study is presented in the following section. Finally, in section eight the conclusions of the study are provided.

2. Significance and Contributions of the Study

Group work is argued to be one of the best learning strategies that EFL students could learn the target language through (Harmer, 2007). Although many studies have been conducted to investigate students' attitudes to group work in the EFL classroom, this subject is, to the best of our knowledge, very unique, new and open to investigation on Kurdish EFL students. This is because after a huge study and investigation about the studies that have been done on group work, it has become apparent that no studies have been conducted to investigate Kurdish students' attitudes to

group work inside EFL classroom. Therefore, the current study could be very significant in that it contributes something unique and new to the literature of group work. It is worth mentioning that only Kurdish students were chosen in this study because at this stage, it is crucial to present the attitudes of the students of this community to the world as few or no studies have been done on such a small community.

3. Literature Review

One of the most important strategies of learning and strengthening students' interaction is the group work. Studies show that group work can develop a host of abilities and skills which are very important for academic and general purposes (Caruso & Woolley, 2008). According to Hansen (2006) working in groups and cooperating with each other is the best strategy to improve our learning and overall skills. Johnson and Johnson (1994, p. 13) defined group work as "a small group that has two or more individuals who; interact with each other, are interdependent, define themselves and are define by others as belonging to the group, share norms concerning matters of common, interest and participate in a system of interlocking roles, influence each other, find the group rewarding, and pursue common goal."

As group work involves many students working together, it might help decrease students' fear and anxiety in the class. This is also because the teacher is not always monitoring them. This strategy has its own merits (Harmer, 2007,p. 166), as follows:

1. It dramatically increases the number of talking opportunities for each student.

2. As there are many students in the group, personal relationships become less problematic and also there is a greater chance of different opinions and varied contributions than in pair work.

3. Group work encourages broad skills of cooperation and negotiation.

4. It promotes learner autonomy by allowing students to make their own decisions in the group without being told what to do by the teacher.

5. It allows students to choose their level of participation more readily as compared to whole class or pair work situation.

Moreover, Scrivener (2011) argues that group work allows students to develop their critical skills and helps them to challenge assumptions. He further states that this type of learning strategy helps students to evaluate each other's work and ideas and thus they learn from each other. Personal experience suggests that group work in EFL classrooms provide students with the opportunity to express themselves in the target language. Burdett and Hastie (2009) argue that working in groups creates a kind of supportive atmosphere where ideas and opinions are developed as it is wheeled from a

member to another in the group. However, it sometimes inhibits the performance of the weakest members as those who are good in the group dominate the tasks carried out (Payne and Monk-Turner, 2006). Group work increases student participation in classroom. According to Tanveer (2008) students in groups communicate enthusiastically with each other. They learn how to communicate and share ideas. Moreover, group work give confidence to students to become skilled through discussions. Students weigh the good and bad sides of a given condition together and then attempt to discover a rational clarification to the problem. Schmidt (2009) states that a group has a leader that encourages the members of the group to focus on growth.

4. Research Objectives
4.1 Research Aim
The aim of this research study is to investigate Kurdish students' attitudes concerning group work in EFL classrooms in Kurdistan region of Iraq. Thus, to achieve this aim, the following questions must be addressed:

4.2 Research Questions
1. Do Kurdish students like to work in groups to learn English?
2. What are some students' positive attitudes of group work?
3. What are students' negative attitudes of group work?

5. Methodology
This project aimed to identify the opinions of Kurdish students regarding the attitudes and the advantages and disadvantages of group work in the classroom. Due to their large number in the universities in Kurdistan, it was decided to take them as a sample to obtain true attitudes as a primary research source for the current research study.

A number of theories have identified the advantages and disadvantages of group work in the classroom such as Harmer (2008), however, only "theoretical research" was available or in other words, the study experiments could not be found. Therefore, it was decided that a questionnaire was the most appropriate tactic to be adopted because it was the quickest method to gather and assess true attitudes of students. To collect beneficial research data a total of hundred (100) Kurdish intermediate and advanced (in speaking English) level students were taken as a sample. Along with the questionnaire, a semi-structured interviewing tool was also employed to collect trustworthy data as much as possible.

5.1 Research Methods
This section provides a detailed description of the methodology followed in the current research study.

5.1.1 Questionnaire

As it is mentioned earlier in this section, a questionnaire is utilised to collect as much data as possible in a short time. Punch (2009) argues that using a questionnaire as a tool for data collection is very important as it provides the research with quick information about the topic being searched into. Some researchers state that the questionnaire provides the researcher with information about the subject being investigated (Cohen et al, 2007; Koshy, 2005; Anderson,2004). In this research study closed format questions that consisted of multiple choices were used in an attempt to help students select the attitudes that are mostly related to their ideas. However, in order for the results of the sample to be more authentic and valid, an open format question was included in the questionnaire as well. This could allow the students express their own views of group work in the classroom. Gilbert (2008) states that it is important for the validity and reliability of the research that the researcher uses different question formats when designing his/her questionnaire.

The questionnaire was anonymous which could give the students a secure atmosphere to answer the questions very frankly. The first question asked them whether they liked group work or not? because it was a direct related question that could affect the results of the sample. Anderson (2004) argues that the anonymity of the questionnaire is important and increases the number of responses. The second question investigates students' positive attitudes about group work inside the classroom. In this section of the questionnaire, six positive points about group work are listed and students are asked to choose three of them. This point could be crucial in that it helps the teacher to be creative about using group work inside the classroom. The third question of the questionnaire focuses on the negative attitudes of the students regarding group work. The design of this section is similar to the second one, however the theme is different. The fourth section is devoted to an open-ended question asking the students to mention some advantages and disadvantages of group work in the classroom. This question is included in the questionnaire to add much validity to the results gained from the data collection methods used (see appendix 1). Cohen et al, (2007) state that the questionnaire becomes more valid and reliable if it includes closed and open-ended questions type. However, it is argued that the questionnaire has its own weaknesses as students might not be honest when filling it in which then might affect the overall results of the research study (May, 2001).

5.1.2 Interview

In this research study, a standardized open-ended interview is conducted with 20 students from different universities in Kurdistan (Zakho, Duhok, Salahaddin, and Sulaimani universities). Such a type of interview

allows the researcher to follow a scheduled list of open-ended questions. Cohen et al, (2007) argue that such type of interview increases the comparability of the answers from the respondents and helps the research to gain complete answers. Moreover, it reduces bias in the data collected. This type of interview also increases the ability of the researcher to logically organize and analyse his/her data (The Open University, 2001). Furthermore, such type of interview is effective in that it helps the researcher to access students' real feeling about the aspect being investigated (Punch, 2009).

The interview schedule included four open-ended questions. The first question asked the students about their overall attitude about group work in the classroom. The second question investigated the advantages of using group work learning strategy inside the classrrom. The disadvantages of using group work in the classroom was highlighted in the third question of the interview schedule. The last question included some positive and negative points about group work, students were asked to choose three points from each category and justify their choices (see appendix 2). Because of the time and the committment to work, students were interviewed through different social media application (Facebook and Skype). It is worth mentioning that each interview lasted for about 20 minutes.

5.1.3 Triangulation

It is argued that using several methods in researching into a problem intensifies the chances of accurateness of the data and results of the study (The Open University, 2001). The current study has utilised more than one method and these methods are qualitative and quantitative. Cohen, et al. (2010: 141) define triangulation as "the use of two or more methods of data collection in the study of some aspects of human behaviour". Thus, in this study a triangualtion methodological strategy is utilised to produce some valid and reiable resutls.

5.2 Population and Sampling

The participants of this study were 100 university students from different universities in Kurdistan. These were chosen on the basis of having been taught English conducting group work. Their level is intermediate and advanced in speaking English. They study English as a foreign language in different universities in Kurdistan. Thus, the type of sampling is purposive as students have already experienced group work. Cohen et al, (2007) argue that purposive sampling is when the researcher chooses his sample from a large number of people engaged in the same subject. They share the same characteristics as having the same experience in the area that the researcher wants to investigate. Gilbert (2001) states that such sampling type is very

effective in that it helps provide the researchers the exact information they search for.

The response rate was %100 and students were very enthusiastic to answer the questions included in the questionnaire. As the questionnaire was not very time consuming students were able to answer it quickly. However, the number of the interviewed students in this study was 20 students chosen randomly from the 100 respondents participated in filling in the questionnaire.

6. Results

This section presents the results of the current study. The organization of the results follows the organization of the questions of both instruments used in this study.

Figure (1) shows the percentage of students' opinions who like and dislike group work in the classroom. Out of 20 students interviewed, 17 (85%) students confirmed that they like to work in groups when they are learning English and the rest also agreed but, according to them, because of some crucial weak points about group work, which are presented under the third theme of the questionnaire, they tended not to confirm their likeness.
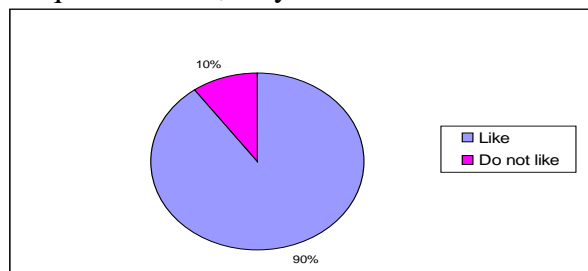

Figure 1: Attitudes concerning group work in the classroom

Figure (2) present the Kurdish students' positive attitudes concerning group work in the classroom. It can be clearly seen that "group work is a mutual interest", "group members clarify difficult things to each other" and "it takes a short time to finish a task in group work" were leading students' positive opinions with 75 responses to the first point, 70 to the second and 55 to the last one in Figure 2. Interview results corresponded positively with the results from the questionnaire. It could be argued that 66.66% of the results of the interview questions confirmed students positive attitudes concerning group work in the questionnaire. This is because interviewees stated that "usually my group friends clarify difficult things for me as much as they can" and "it takes a short time to finish a task in group work" were confirmed by the interviewee students. Moreover, results from the interviews revealed that "working in groups makes me express my ideas more freely" came among the points with the highest three items chosen by the interviewees.
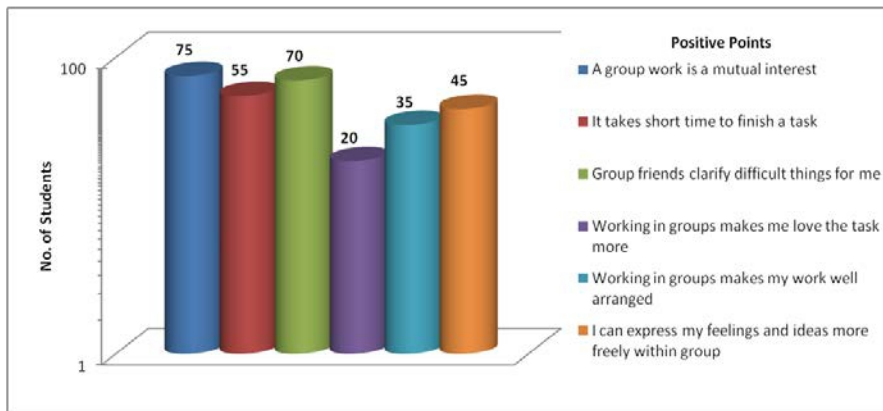
Figure 2: Students positive attitudes of group work in the classroom

Regarding students' negative attitudes to group work, Figure 3 shows that "some members prefer to relax and stay silent", "some members do not like to work", and "group work is a waste of time as students talk about external things and they cannot reach any agreement" were the top three questionnaire items chosen by the participants. The first item had a response rate of 75 students out of 100 participants. The second item had a rate of 70 students out of 100 while the third one had only 60 response rate as it is shown in Figure 3.
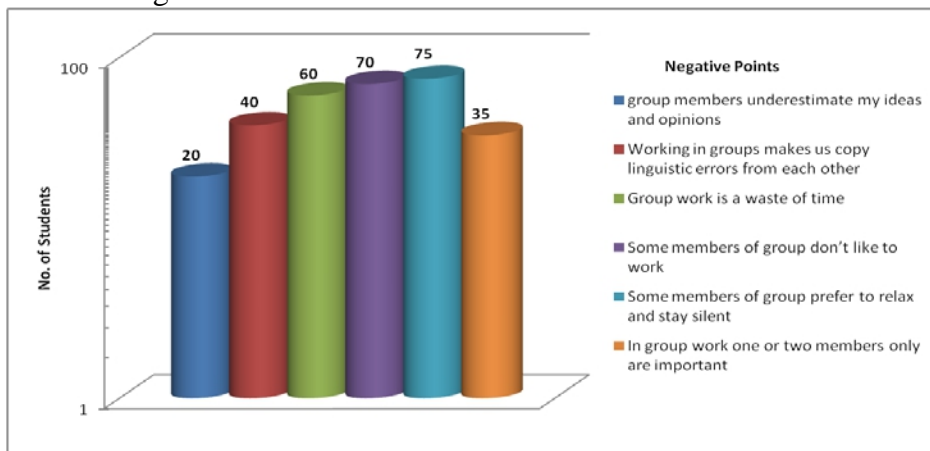

Figure 3: Students negative attitudes of group work in the classroom

As for the interview results related to negative viewpoints of participants concerning group work, the three items discussed above were confirmed by the twenty interviewees as they all stated that "some members of a group prefer to relax and stay silent instead of participating, "some members of a group do not like to work", and "group work is a waste of time".

Interestingly, the item "working in groups makes me love the task more" had the lowest response rate among the positive items. Moreover, among the negative ones, the item "members underestimate my ideas and they don't care about my opinions" received the lowest response rate.

Most of the open question responses were almost identical to those mentioned in questions 2 and 3. Nevertheless, some valuable positive and negative points were among their attitudes. The positive ones were such as "keep better communication among students", "it broadens our minds". One of the important negative ones was "Most students may become dependent and lazy". It could be argued that these findings have not previously been found by any other research in Kurdistan.

Concerning the advantages and disadvantages of group work in the classroom, the results of the open-ended question in the questionnaire were as follows:

Advantages
- It broadens the mind.
- Keeps better communication.
- It can make students more motivated.
- It is good to improve the language.

Disadvantages
- Most of the students may become dependent and lazy.
- Some wrong opinions from others may mislead my thinking direction.
- There are many unnecessary discussions.

Regarding the advantages and disadvantages of group work, the interviewed students collectively suggested three advantages and three disadvantages of group work, as follows:

Advantages:
- Motivates students to work and express their thoughts.
- Helps students communicate with each other.
- Improves their English language.

Disadvantages:
- Students become dependent and lazy.
- Students tend to use their mother tongue.
- Affects consensus building between the students.

7. Discussion

This study aimed to investigate Kurdish students' attitudes concerning group work in EFL classrooms in Kurdistan region of Iraq. As for the positive attitudes, the majority of the students' responses fell into "group work is mutual interest", "group members clarify difficult things to

each other", and "it takes a short time to finish a task in group work". These findings corroborate previous research done by Doff (1989). In his research Doff claims "pair work and group work encourage students to share ideas and knowledge". It could be suggested that Kurdish students showed the preference of these options due to the student-centered nature of the task. As for mutual support they receive from each other in the same group, Juan and Flor, (2008), and Johnson and Johnson (1995) state that group work is best for providing support for each other because of the variety of levels each class and each group includes. Harmer (2011) emphasized students' freedom from teachers' pressure and how teachers can encourage them to help their peers talking and doing tasks within their groups. The above items were all confirmed by the interviewees. However, "working in groups makes me express my ideas more freely" was the only item different from those corresponded with the data collected from the questionnaire. Students seem to feel less strained when they work in groups. Nakahashi (2007) states that working in groups is believed to reduce students' anxiety level and provide them with the chances to produce language.

Concerning negative attitudes, the majority of responses from both instruments (questionnaire and interview) went for "some members prefer to relax and stay silent", "some do not like to work" and "group work is a waste of time as students talk about external things and they cannot reach any agreement". There could be some possible reasons for these results. Lush (2009) has speculated that a student might not want to work with some particular students in a group or likes teachers' directions more than being involved in a student-centered task. Low level EFL students might think that group work is a waste of time as it is sometimes difficult for them to communicate with their friends in the same group. Hyland (2006) argues that teachers should monitor and facilitate the communication among the students of the same group as this would provide them with the best atmosphere to use their language and improve it. Moreover, it could be deduced that because of the diversity of levels in the same class, and in the same group as well, students might become dependent. Accordingly, Glanz (2004) states that teachers should be careful not to put top students with low level ones in the same group as those with low levels will not participate and completely depend on others. Moreover, teachers should always move around the class when students work in groups to encourage all students to work together and help each other in the same group (Lush, 2009).

Surprisingly, "copying linguistic errors" was not among their top negative attitudes on the contrary of Doff's research (1989) who lists students' mistakes one of important drawbacks of group work. However, with small sample size caution must be applied because Chinese students' might lack experience of group work.

In conclusion, the open question responses contributed some significant positive and negative findings to the research such as "keeping better communication" and "most students may become dependent and lazy". The first is consistent with Harmers' (2011) study, while the second opposes it. It is agreed that students feel more independent and there is better chance for communication in mini-groups (Brown, 2007; Heip, 2007; Harmer, 2011).

8. Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate Kurdish students' attitudes concerning group work in EFL classrooms in Kurdistan region of Iraq. The following conclusions can be drawn from the present research study. Friends in the same group help each other and clarify things for each other and becasue of the positive collaboration that takes place in the group students finish their tasks in a relatively short time were the basic positive attitudes of Kurdish students towards group work in the classroom, meanwhile the prominent disadvantages of group work according to the students were that some members of the group preferred not to share their ideas with the group and also they were taking group work as their relax time, some members do not like to work, and it is a waste of time to work in groups because students of the same groups discuss about some unrelated topics and cannot reach an agreement. The significant qualitative findings of advantages were "providing better communication" and "gaining ideas from each other", while "making students dependent and lazy" was the disadvantage of qualitative findings. Taken together, these results suggest that Kurdish students have shown a mixture of student-centered and teacher-centered natures of classrooms together, possibly because of the fact that they were previously taught in a teacher-centred style. Moreover, it could be because of their lack of experience of group work. Thus, this research study has successfully identified the opinions of Kurdish students studying in different universities in Kurdistan regarding group work in the classroom.

This research has highlighted some questions in need of further investigation. For instance, "copying linguistic errors" was not chosen as one of top negative attitudes of Kurdish students, while (Doff 1989:140) claims that it is an important problem of group work. So, further research maybe is needed to address the seriousness of copying each others' mistakes in groups. Moreover, some students' responses to the qualitative question emphasized that group work makes students dependent, in contrast to (Harmer 2011:43) who states that group work provides students with greater opportunities for independence. A further study on this case would help us to establish a greater degree of accuracy on this matter as well. A considerable comprehension of such opinions could suggest some policies and programs

for some of the Kurdish teachers teaching student-centered classrooms regarding the use of group work. Therefore, it is hoped that university teachers in Kurdistan region of Iraq carefully consider the conclusions of the current study to change their behaviour and adapt this strategy of learning appropriately in the classroom.

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Appendix 1: Questionnaire
   1- Do you like group work?　　　　　a- Yes　　　　b- No
   2- What do you think are the positive points of group work in the classroom? Please tick three
   □ A group work is a mutual interest i.e. you help them and they help you.
   □ It takes short time to finish a task when I work with a partner or a group.
   □ Usually my group friends clarify difficult things for me as much as they can.
   □ Working in groups makes me love the task more.
   □ Working in groups makes my work well arranged.
   □ I can express my feelings and ideas more freely while working within group.
   3- What do you think are the negative points of group working in the classroom? Please tick three

□ If I work in a group, its members underestimate my ideas and they don't care about my opinions.

□ Working in groups makes us copy linguistic errors from each other.

□ Group work is a waste of time as students talk about external things and they can't reach any agreement.

□ Some members of group don't like to work.

□ Some members of group prefer to relax and stay silent instead of participating.

□ In group work one or two students only are important not all of the members.

4- Can you think of other advantages and disadvantages of group working in the classroom?

Appendix 2: Interview Schedule

No.	Questions
1.	What is your attitudes toward group work inside the classroom?
2.	What do you think are the advantages of using group work strategy inside the classroom? Why?
3.	What do you think are the disadvantages of using group work strategy inside the classroom? Why?
4.	The following are some of the positive and negative attitudes of using group work in the classroom, which points would you choose for each category? Why? **Advantages:** A group work is a mutual interest i.e. you help them and they help you. It takes short time to finish a task when I work with a partner or a group. Usually my group friends clarify difficult things for me as much as they can. Working in groups makes me love the task more. Working in groups makes my work well arranged. I can express my feelings and ideas more freely while working within group. **Disadvantages:** -If I work in a group, its members underestimate my ideas and they don't care about my opinions. -Working in groups makes us copy linguistic errors from each other. -Group work is a waste of time as students talk about external things and they can't reach any agreement. -Some members of group don't like to work. -Some members prefer to relax and stay silent instead of participating. -In group work one or two students only are important not all of the members.