Group Work Effectiveness in English Language Teaching

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فاعلية العمل الجماعي في تعليم اللغة الانجليزية

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Abstract

The paper presents a brief background about group work and its nature. The overall aim of the paper is to find out whether or not the group work is an effective method in English language teaching in the department of English in the College of Arts, University of Kufa, and also, why teachers use group work in the curriculum? A questionnaire is used to collect data. Ten questions are presented and the participated student has four answers to pick from, he can choose from answers such as agree, strongly agree, disagree, and strongly disagree. The results showed that female students prefer group work more than male students. The concept of group work is an effective method in the department of English language, in the College of Arts.

Keywords: *group work, language functions, questionnaire, benefits of group work, chances of effectiveness, effective climate, improvements, feedback.*

الملخَّص:

تتناول الدراسة الحالية خلفية مقتضبة عن فكرة العمل الجماعي و طبيعته. يهدف البحث بمجمله الى ايجاد امكانية ان يكون العمل الجماعي ذو فاعلية و تأثير في تعليم اللغة الانجليزية في قسم اللغة الانجليزية/كلية الاداب/جامعة الكوفة. كما ان البحث يهدف الى البحث عن الاسباب التي تكمن وراء استخدام العمل الجماعي في المنهج الدراسي المقرر للقسم. و قد استخدمت طريقة الاستبانة لجمع البيانات و قد تم تقديم عشرة اسئلة في هذه الاستبانة و على الطالب المشارك فيها الاجابة عن هذه الاسئلة و يكون لديه اربع خيارات للاجابة. و هذا و ان مفهوم العمل الجماعي يعد من الطرق الفعالة و الناجعة في قسم اللغة الانجليزية في كلية الاداب.

الكلمات المفتاحية: العمل الجماعي، وظائف اللغة، الاستبانة، فوائد العمل الجماعي، فرص الفاعلية ، الفاعلية المكثفة، التغذية الراجعة، خلق الاجواء المناسبة

1. General Overview

The paper deals with the concept of group work and what is the effective method in language teaching? In the world of teaching; teachers use so many methods and techniques to teach their students. There are three methods of teaching that come to mind when dealing with this matter. They are individual work, group work, and class work. The individual work deals with the students own ability to complete things without the help of others. The group work is a whole different concept that deals with two or three students working together hand in hand to achieve goals. The class work is like a group discussion where the whole class comes to a suitable solution. They are all effective teaching methods, but the most effective one is group work. Thereare so many reasons why this is the most effective method. In today's world of labor, big fortune five hundred companies spend a lot of money on their employees in order to improve group work among their employees. In the work force, group work is a must.

Accordingly, the present paper endeavors to answer the following questions:

1. What is meant by the concept of group work?
2. What are the various kinds of group work?
3. Why is group work used?
4. Is the group work an effective method in English Language Teaching in the department of English language / College of Arts, University Kufa?

1.1 Methodology

The type of data collected for answering the questions of the paper included designing a questionnaire and applying it to forty students, and out of these forty students insights can be obtained concerning the usefulness of group work. In addition, a quantitative method is used to calculate answers. The questionnaire design is a structured in a way that deals with four multiple choice answers.

2. Group Work: Definitions and Background

Cohen (1994:1) states that group work refers to "students working together in a group small enough so that everyone can participate on a task that has been clearly assigned". In addition Stenaasen and Sletta (2000:25-26) define group work as "A group consists of two or more people who have a mutual influence on each other and are mutually depend on another in the sense that they have to trust each other to get their needs satisfied and achieve their goals." Therefore, the term group

work is defined as a joint operation where two or more students work together to complete a project in a certain amount of time. The students use critical thinking, problem solving and each person plays a role in completing the project smoothly. The concept of group work arises from a thing called democracy. The concept of group work is a representation of a democratic government, where each member in the group has an equal saying in everything. The group works together to come up with a suitable solution and achieve goals in a sufficient amount of time (Jeffs et al., 2005).

The concept of group work is used by many teachers and college professors all over the world. The reason why teachers and college professors use group work is because it is an effective method that improves the student's ability to use critical thinking and be able to out judge and out reason why he chose that answer. The other reason is because it involves collaborative teamwork which involves the student to work amongst a group and being able to exchange ideas, so that the task is finished within a certain deadline. The concept of collaborative work is a strong aspect which is needed when the student enters the workforce and all employers look for this key factor when hiring employees. The reason that this method is used is because it develops the students' communicative skills. It helps the student to carry any barriers or shynessthat he may have which is preventing him from speaking and it allows him to speak freely (Amanda, 2011).

2.1 The Benefits of Using Group Work

The benefit of a group work is that it helps the student to break complex problems into smaller parts which make it easier on the student to get the job done. This very efficient method also reduces the time that a student has to spend when working on a project, in other words it saves the student time and makes it stress free on the students part. This method also helps when it comes to thinking, the other students can give ideas that are not thought of and fill the missing gaps that have been missed, like they say two minds are better than one. This useful process serves as a key source when students do not understand things. It gives them a chance to understand things through group discussions which make it easier on the student's part to get the task done. The student also develops strong communication skills and gets rid of any shyness, hesitation or fear he may have which prevent him from speaking. The student also develops a sense of identity and belonging when joining a group. The student also deepens his knowledge about things and learns

more things he was unaware of in the past. In groups, a student can find help and support when he needs it the most. The beneficial reason why teachers use this technique is because when it comes to grading, they have less work on their hand and also saves them time (Amanda, 2011). The following is an outline of some of the most crucial advantages and usefulness of group work.

2.1.1 Providing the Chances of Input and Output

In a study on the input and output of group work, it is said that students placed in a group get a larger chance to speak than they could when they are isolated in a class environment. In a recent study it shows that students do not speak less grammatically when placed in a group than they are in a regular classroom setting. It also shows that each student will also pronounce words differently and talk in different pace, than they did in a regular class environment. The concept of cooperative language learning also creates interaction between students, by forcing the student to listen to the other students around, by also having the student ask questions, and also clarify information that are not clear. This very effective technique serves as a negotiation between students which increases the input and output of information. In a group setting, it is clear that students will use longer sentences than they did when they were alone (Zhang, 2010; Haynes, 2011).

2.1.2 Increasing Effective Climate

In order to provide students with an effective learning environment when it comes to working in groups. The student would need to avoid committing any behavior that would affect the other students around him. The teacher must show equal respect and care for every student in the classroom. This means that the teacher should not embarrass a student in front of his classmates, but he should encourage him. The teacher can use humor and tell jokes which causes an enjoyable environment for the students and at the same time relieves the tension and boredom within the students and causes him to stay focus in the class. The teacher can hold classroom discussions on topics that the students are interested in, which motivates them to interact in class with one another. The other approach that is used by teachers to establish a positive learning environment is by the teacher creating a set of classroom rules that the students have to follow which causes a safe and friendly learning environment (Jaques et al., 2006).

2.1.3Increasing a Variety of Language Functions

In order to increase a variety of language functions, the group would need to practice the skills which are listed as the following: (Zhang, 2010)

a. **Requesting**- In order to increase a variety of language functions within the group. The teacher or group leader requests information from each student or group members (Mark, 2008).

b. **Clarifying**- In a group, each student gives an idea. The students in the group debate the idea and the student who suggested that idea has to justify and give reasons backing up his idea (Raja et al., 2012).

c. **Making suggestions**- In a group, the students would give suggestions to cause an ongoing chain of ideas which helps the group in producing results and reaching one specific goal.

d. **Encouraging**- In a group, it is vital for each member or group leader encouraging his members. When there is encouragement in the group, the group member is going to be confident in himself and at the same time he gets the feeling that he is an important asset to his group. When the member feels that he is needed. He is going to be an active participant. When he is active, he is going to create, develop, inspire, and perform work at his very best which causes a completion in the project (Warren, 2000).

e. **Disagreeing**- The students in a group will disagree with each other because everyone is created equal and they all have different ideas and no one agrees with each other. When students disagree with each other, that creates room for the students to discuss their differences and creates ideas which is useful for group work.

f. **Exchanging conversation during group work**- In group work, the students tend to exchange conversation and communicate with one another. The reason for this communication is to relieve the stress within the student and also at the same time, the students exchange ideas.

g. **Negotiating meaning**- This is a process where all the students communicate with one another to understand each other and come to one clear idea.

These seven methods are all active useful methods which form the group work within the group and formulate ideas to get the project done.

2.1.4 Fostering Learner Responsibility and Independence

The last part of the features is fostering learner responsibility and independence. The concept of group work is a cooperative learning experience which deals with a group working hand in hand to achieve things and get a job done in a specific amount of time, but what students do not know is that students are improving abilities such as critical thinking, problem solving, communication skills, brainstorming and etc. The experience he had working in a group leads to a shift from interdependence to independence. The work he did in the group caused him to improve skills that we mentioned above allowing him to depend on his own judgments of a situation (Zhang, 2010).

2.2 Forming Group Work

The formation of group work depends on three deciding factors. The deciding factors are the task demands, the resources in the group, and the group processes. The task demands depend on three aspects; they are whether the problem is devisable or unitary. The term devisable refers to whether the problem can be divided into smaller parts amongst the group members. On the other hand, we refer to a problem as unitary, unitary means that the problem is not dividable among group members and that only one person can work on it. The second aspect deals with the group's achievement and the third aspect deals with resources and how they exchange the ideas they have researched or came up with. In this aspect, it deals with time and how they used their time and also deals with how much effort they have put into their work. The second factor deals with resources and all the necessary resources that they have to get the project done. The third factor is the group processes and this deals with the necessary steps taken by group members when they face a difficult problem (Amanda, 2011).

In order to create the work within the group, the group goes through a cycle which involves four stages. The stages are listed as the following according to Richards et al. (2011):

a. **Forming**- In this stage, the group members come together and meet for the first time. This is the part where the teacher introduces them to their task and what is expected of them as a group.

b. **Norming**- In this stage, after the group has come together. The group begins to exchange ideas, thoughts, values, and opinions. The group leader also sets ground rules for the group members in order to run a smooth project. The teacher also plays a vital role

in group work. He has the role of encouraging students to work toward their goal and keeps them moving in the right direction.

c. **Storming**- In the third stage, which is the storming part. The group is working together to complete a task. In this stage, problems will arise due to the different ideas brought to the table by different people. In life it is only nature for people to disagree because each person was created differently and everyone has a different thought in his head. The teacher can prevent this from happening by playing the role of peer meditator which comes between the students and guides them in the right path.

d. **Performing**- It is the final stage of group work, after the group shares their ideas. The group is now ready to work on the project and complete their task. The teacher as usual is the person in charge of motivating, encouraging, and keeping the student focused on their task.

2.3 Improvements on Group Work

There are so many reasons why group work fails. When students work in a group, they need to focus on factors such as the following listed by (David, 2011).

a. **Environmental influences**-The reason why groups fail to achieve success is due to distance. The students cannot work due to the separation of each student which causes a delay in achieving their goal.

b. **Goals**- The other main reason why group work fails is because there is no participation from other group members. The group members depend on the smart student to do his work and their work, which causes stress and a hand full on that student, which leads to failure.

c. **Roles**- The other leading reason why group work fails is due to the group members being unaware of what they have to do and what is their part in the group.

d. **Competition vs. Cooperation**- The students fail as a group because each student is focused on achieving a goal and defeating the other group members, rather than staying focus and cooperating with his other group members in order to achieve a group goal and completing the project.

e. **Feedback**- The main reason why group work fails is due to the lack of feedback given by the teacher and students amongst each other. This concept gives them a sort of idea of what is missing

and fills the gaps they have. This technique redirects the student and guides him in the right path.

f. **Lack of resources**- The group fails because they lack the essential resources to get the job done. This means they do not have enough information or material for the completion of their project.

g. **Lack of respect**- The reason why group work fails is because group members in a group do not respect each other. There is a lack of respect due to a person's idea, point of view, race, nationality, and traditions. These cause problems, which causes a group to fail.

h. **Time management**- A group fails because the group leader or group members do not manage their time and do not spend their time wisely. The group wastes all their time doing one thing and focusing on one thing only.

i. **Processes**- The group fails because sometimes the person who is in charge has the last say in things.

j. **Bad behavior**- The group fails not because of the whole team, but because of one person's conduct.

k. **Poor Listening**- Another reason for group failure is because group members do not listen to directions given by the teachers or group leaders.

l. **How to stand for your opinion**- A reason why group work fails most of the time is because a student will give his own opinion, but he will not be able to justify and give reasons to back up his opinion.

3. Questionnaire, Results, and Discussion

The main focus of the paper is to understand "whether the group work is an effective method of language teaching", how do teachers use group work? When do teachers use group work? And also what outcomes do the students achieve when using group work? In order to achieve the objectives of the paper, a questionnaire is designed. The answers for the questionnaire are either structured or unstructured. In a structured questionnaire, the participant is limited and does not have the option to answer freely. Instead, he is given choices that he has to choose from. On the other hand, there is an unstructured questionnaire where the participant is not limited and he is open to answer freely as he likes and whatever comes to his mind.
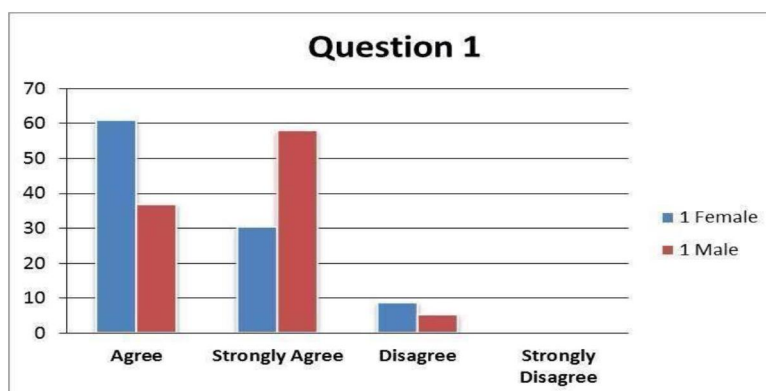
3.1 Participants
The study was performed at the University of Kufa, College of Arts, English Department located in Najaf, Iraq. The participants who will be involved in this survey are forty students. The first twenty students are students from the morning studies and they are fourth year students. The second twenty students are students from the evening studies and they are also fourth year students. The ages of the students are from twenty to thirty-five. The participants are nineteen males and twenty one females.

3.2 Results and Discussion
1. When working in a group, do you find it to be useful for you?

In table (1), it can be clearly seen that most participants agree and strongly agree with the idea of group work. It is 61% for females who agreed, whereas there are 37% of males who agreed. It is obvious that females prefer group work more than males. We have also found that 30% of females strongly agreed, whereas 58% of males strongly agreed. There are few students who do not agree: 9% for females disagreed, while males are 5%. These results prove that group work can be effective since most subjects strongly agree and agree with the idea.
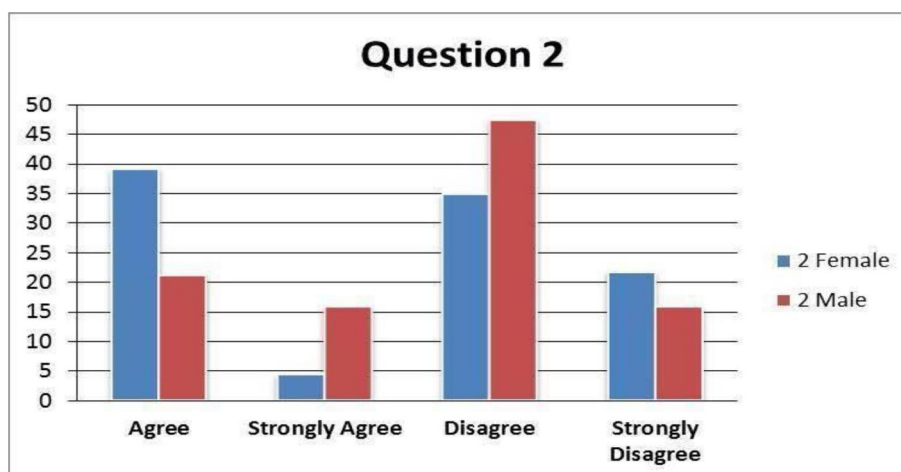
Table (1)

٢- Do you face any problems when involved in a group?

The second question reflects different reactions of students. Generally, we can infer that participants do not find problems when working in groups, except for females in which there are 39% agreed, whereas only 21% of males. However, a number of 35% of females disagree and find it without problems. Most males disagree with the idea in which nearly half of the students (47%) do not face any difficulty in involving in their group work with a percentage of 16% strongly agreed. Females who have chosen strongly disagree are 23%, see table (2).
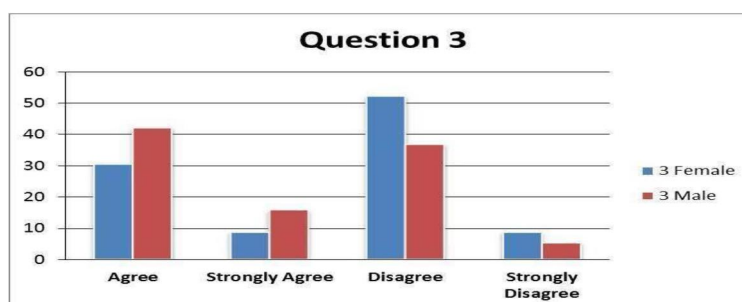
Table (2)

٣- Does every group member cooperate in completing the assignment?

In table (3), the students have diverged into agreeing or disagreeing with their opinions in choosing answers. The highest number is for females who have answered with "disagree" in which there are 52% of them disagree. This proposes that mostly all students cooperate in the same way in assigning their task. In addition, male participants have a percentage of 38% who also disagree. However, forty-two percent of males agreed with nine percent of females strongly disagree.

Table(3)

4- Did every teacher provide your group with a safe working environment?

It is clearly seen that in table (4) most answers do agree that teachers provide a safe working environment. It is found that 74% of females agreed and 22% strongly agreed. For males, there are 63% who agreed

and 26% who strongly agreed. It is striking that none of females have chosen disagree with the statement; there is only one student who has chosen strongly disagree.
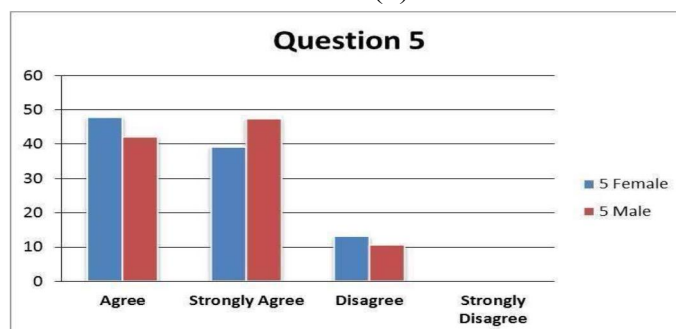
Table (4)
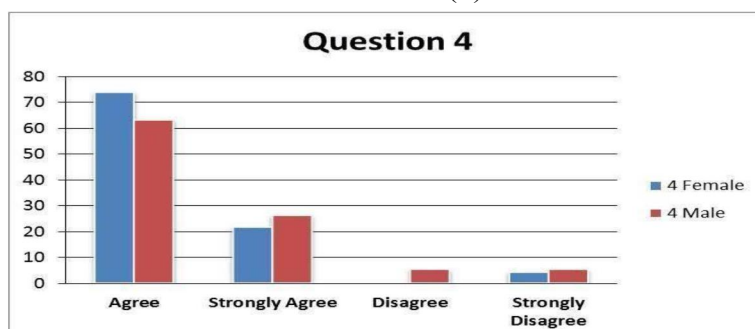
5- Do you prefer to work in a group?

Answers of question five are nearly equally distributed between agree and strongly agree. This means that most participants prefer to work in groups. For agree, we find females slightly surpass males; conversely, male participants are not great higher than females in choosing strongly agree. What is most surprising is finding no tokens with strongly disagree. There are very few students who disagree, only thirteen percent of females disagreed and eleven percent of males disagreed.
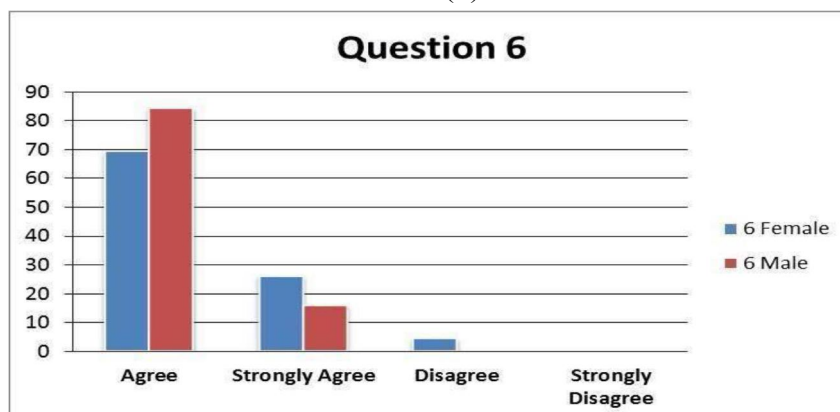
Table (5)

6- Did the discussions among group members relate to the project?

In table (6), the results noticeably show that participants' discussions in their group work are connected to the subject and their project. Males reflections are higher than females in behaving to agree option, while it is slower in disagree reflection. There are 84% of males and 69% of females who have chosen 'agree'. Furthermore, there are 26% of females who strongly agreed, and 16% of males who strongly agreed. No males

have been found to disagree or strongly disagree with the statement. There are only one female student who disagreed.

Table (6)

7- Did the group members listen to each other's ideas?

Table no. (7) evidently demonstrates that males' answers are dominant for agreeing that they listen to each other's ideas in which there are 63% of them have chosen 'agree' as well as 26% with strongly agree. Only two students of males disagreed and no males have selected strongly disagree. On the other hand, the same percentage can be found for males who have chosen 'agree' and 'disagree' of about 39%. Moreover, twenty-two of females strongly agreed and none has selected strongly disagree. To conclude, we can infer that most students agree with the question main idea.
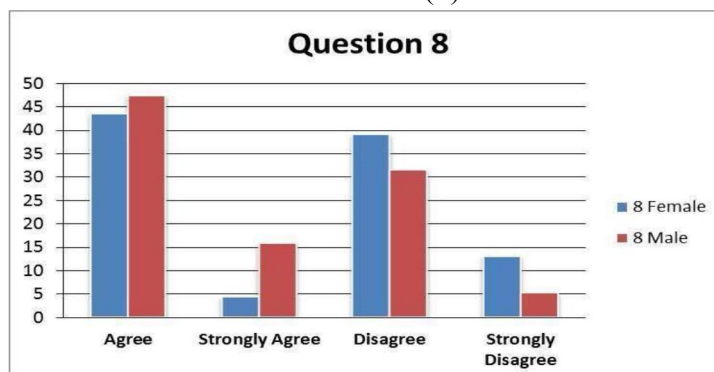
Table (7)
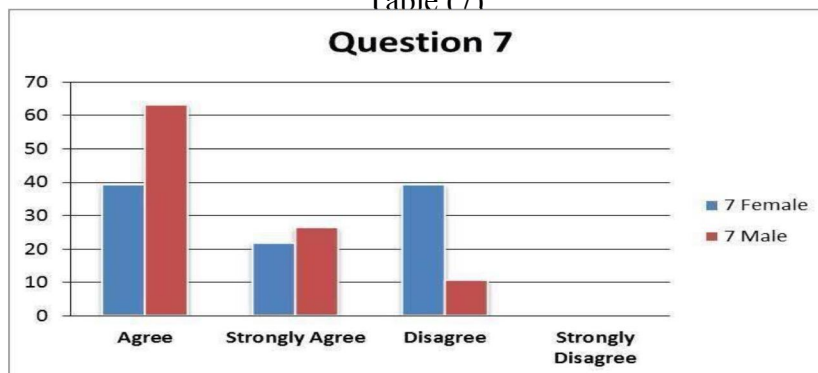
8- When involved in a group, did the group members manage their time efficiently?

This question measures the time management by the group members. Overall, the answers are fluctuated between agree and disagree. Nearly nine female students have chosen agreed (43%) and only one has picked strongly agreed. However, there are about 39% of female disagreed which is less than the agreeing option. Concerning males, there are more males than females agreeing with the statement of a percentage 47%, but lesser than females in choosing disagree (32%).

Table (8)

9-Do you think it is a good method for learning?

In table (9), we are investigating whether or not the group method is helpful for learning. The overall outcome is that most learners find it helpful and a good method for learning English language. Nearly 65% of the total numbers of students have chosen "strongly agree". The number of males exceeds the number of males in last choice in which 73% for males and 58% for females. The rest of students have a less degree in agreeing with the statement, but there are no learners who disagree and strongly disagree.

Table (9)
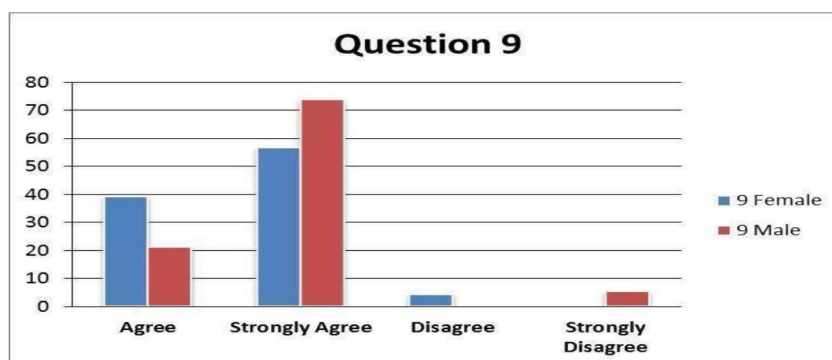
10- Did you use outside resources rather than the ones your teacher gave you?

This question conducts students' opinions about using outside resources concerning group work. The results illustrate that the greater number of students agreed and strongly disagreed (79%) in general. In both selections, the males are little higher than females (47%) for agree and (37%) for strongly disagree, while for females (44%) for agree and (30%) for strongly disagree. There are only four students disagreed.

Table (10)
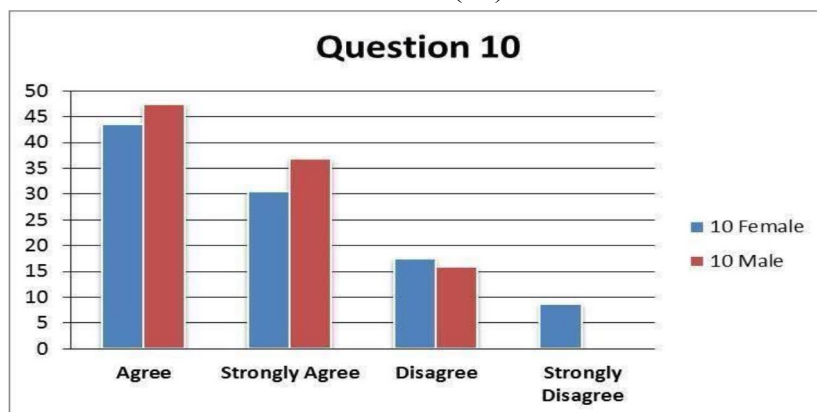
The statistics of the questionnaire show that group work is a useful method for students in their lessons. In Iraq, it is a very useful method of teaching, but sometimes it has its ups and downs. It has shortcomings in that the classes are lacking for visual aids that ease the learning process. Large numbers of students present another problem to working in groups, and the lack for a solid educational background in learning the language is also creating a barrier to group work. However, although there are many problems, it is still an effective and useful method of learning and teaching for students.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, after a brief analysis of surveying both genders, it has been found that the females prefer group work and they are likely to succeed in working with other group members than the males who reject the idea of working in groups. It shows clearly that the female participants have no problem when involved in a group. On the other hand, the male participants face issues when involved in a group.

In attempting to answer the research questions it is found that teachers use group work in similar ways and for similar reasons and that they all have the same problems with their students. We believe that teachers instruct their students on how to work in groups in the same way

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