

Conflict Resolution Strategies in Class Discussions

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Received: April 25, 2020 Accepted: July 6, 2020 Published: August 28, 2020

doi:10.5296/ije.v12i3.16914 URL: <https://doi.org/10.5296/ije.v12i3.16914>

Abstract

The use of class discussions as a class activity is becoming popular in the learning environment. A lot can be achieved as a group than individually. Learners gain knowledge as well as communication skills. However, in almost every group discussion, there can be conflicts. Conflicts can occur due to opposing views on the topics or even among personalities. Do learners gain anything from the conflicts? This quantitative study explores the perception of learners on discussion and conflicts during class interactions. 164 students were chosen to respond to a 32-item questionnaire. The instrument used is a questionnaire of 32 items Section A is the demographic profile. Section B looks at learners' perception on "competing", section looks at learners' perceptions on "accommodating", section D looks at learners' perception on "avoiding", while section E looks at learners' perceptions on "compromising and collaborating". Findings of this study reveal interesting pedagogical implications in the use of class discussions as part of teaching-learning activities.

Keywords: class discussion, conflicts, competing, accommodating, avoiding, compromising, collaborating

1. Introduction

The introduction discusses the background of the study, the statement of problem, the objective of the study as well as the research questions.

1.1 Background of Study

The influx of millennial entering institutions of higher learning has changed the teaching-learning environment. Previous chalk-and-talk methods have been replaced with activities that involve interaction in the classroom. According to Rahmat (2020), millennials enjoy group collaboration. They strive on personal relationships. They also prefer and appreciate instructors who show personal interests in their goals. In addition to that, the study by Blazar & Kraft (2017) reported that classrooms that are overly focused on routines and management are negatively related to students' enjoyment in class.

However, interactions may sometimes lead to disagreement among the participants. Group conflicts may occur and these conflicts may initially lead to negative consequences of the groups' productivity. Nevertheless, the conflict may actually lead to unplanned generation of idea creations. Horton and Clark (2006) reported that sometimes the disagreement in the group discussion forces the members to think critically. This is because when conflicts occur, the person involved may be forced to think of ways to make the other team members accept their ideas. Not only is the person using critical thinking skills to defend his/her ideas, the other team members would also use critical thinking skills to accept/reject ideas coming their way.

1.2 Statement of Problem, Objective of Study and Research Questions

Class discussion have been used as part of teaching and learning activities and many have agreed on its benefits. Qui, Hewitt and Brett (2014) said that class discussions facilitated students towards in-dept discussion. Participants in class discussions are often seen engaged communications. However, group discussions are comprised of team members with a variety of ideas and ways of thinking. Disagreements and conflicts may occur during in-dept discussion. Some instructors may see this as negative. Nevertheless, a closer look into the group conflicts may reveal how learners actually can take advantage of conflicts in class discussions. Thus, not all conflicts are bad. The sometimes "heated" argument in some class discussion can benefit many parties. This study investigates how group conflicts in class discussions.

The main objective of this study is to investigate how learners perceive their ability to deal with group conflicts using the conflict resolution strategies. Specifically, this study hopes to answer the following questions;

- (a) How do learners perceive class discussions?
- (b) How do learners perceive competition in class discussions?
- (c) How do learners perceive accommodation in class discussions?
- (d) How do learners avoid conflicts in class discussions?
- (e) How do learners compromise and collaborate in class discussions?

(f) Are there any significance difference for class discussions and conflict resolution across gender?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Class Discussions and Conflict Resolutions

Class discussions has many advantages. One obvious benefit of class interaction is improved communication skills. During class discussion, team members work together to benefit from the communication. The interaction during the discussions can help learners acquire knowledge and skills. The study by Carrasco & Iribarra (2018) found that students gain more than just interaction during class discussions. They learn to help one another. They learn to be more open-minded to accept the view of others. Students with a higher exposure to classroom discussion were hypothesized to display more tolerant attitudes to other groups and hold more egalitarian values in general. Besides that, classroom discussions encourage collaborative communication. These collaborative discussions can promote critical thinking skills and the long-term retention of information (Hew & Cheung, 2010) as well as help students focus on in-depth discussion (Qui, Hewitt, & Brett, 2014).

Class discussions may take different forms when both genders are put together to communicate. Interesting findings by Victoria (2017) showed that gender differ in communication styles and the differences can be seen through many ways. For example, women avoided discussions compared to men (Caspi, Chajut, Sporta, & Beyth-Marm, 2005) and also male participated more in face-to-face classroom. Krupnick(1985) found that males talked two and one half times longer when there was both male professor and more male versus female students. Interestingly, when the instructor was female, female learners spoke three times longer when there were in a male instructor's classroom.

Furthermore, sometimes communication in class discussions may not go as planned. Sometimes, the communication in the group may be seen as lacking. Then in this case, the team members would have to think of ways to make the interaction work. In addition to that, Rahmat (2011) found that class discussions help learners discover knowledge in a group. Surprising, even negative interaction may improve learners in one way or another. Firstly, the learners learn that their usual way of communication may not work in a group. Next, they learner whose ide was rejected worked hard the defend his/her idea and that improve knowledge. The learner picked up problem solving skills as he/she got angry with the party who opposed his/her idea. This learner would then plan "silently" the next time he/her presents ideas, the opposing party would accept. This would lead to increase of persuasive skills and thus improve knowledge in the long run.

Group collaboration allows team members to learn from one another. The group can learn from each other's experiences and knowledge. According to Holton and Clarke (2006), the scaffolding is shared by each member and changes constantly as the group works on a task. In addition to that, according to Vygotsky (Santrock, 2009), students develop higher-level thinking skills when scaffolding occurs with an adult expert or with a peer of higher capabilities

It is believed that students discard their ideas when paired with an adult /teacher whom they assumed had more expertise. Instead, students should be paired with their peers who have different perspectives. Conflicts would then take place between students allowing them to think constructively at a higher level.

Class discussion may often lead to conflicts but the attempt to solve the conflicts within the group give the learners problem solving skills. Rahmat, Othman, Muhammad Anuarudin and Arepin (2019) also found that class interaction exposes learners to solve problems as a team. The process of problem solving is a good platform for learners to learn to agree, disagree or even agree to disagree with team members. Conflicts in class discussion cannot be avoided and it can be managed. According to Overton and Lowry (2013) conflict competence is “the ability to develop and use cognitive, emotional, and behavioural skills that enhance productive outcomes of conflict while reducing the likelihood of escalation or harm.

Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilmann (1974) developed five conflict resolution strategies that people use to handle conflict, including **competing**, **accommodating**, **avoiding**, **compromising**, and **collaborating**. This framework assumes that team members choose how cooperative and how assertive they want to be in a conflict.

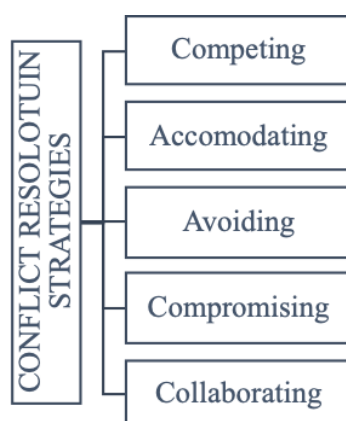


Figure 1. Conflict Resolution Strategies (source: Thomas & Kilman, 1974)

Figure 1 above presents five strategies learners sue when they try to resolve a conflict in group discussions. The (a) first strategy is “competing”. This is when the team member takes a wholly assertive and un-operative approach to resolve the conflict. This could mean standing up for the speakers’ right, defending a position, or it could also try to beat the other party. The (b) second) strategy is called “accommodating”. This is when the team member takes a wholly unassertive and co-operative approach. This might take the form of selfless generosity or charity, giving in to another person's orders when he/she would prefer not to, or yielding to another's point of view. The (c) third strategy is “avoiding” this is when the team member takes an unassertive and unco-operative approach to the conflict and chooses not to deal with the conflict. Avoiding might take the form of diplomatically sidestepping an issue, postponing an issue until a better time, or simply withdrawing from a threatening situation.

The (d) fourth strategy is “compromising”. This refers to both assertive and co-operative but only to some extent. Both sides get something but not everything. It might mean splitting the difference between the two positions, some give and take, or seeking a quick solution in the middle ground. The last strategy (e) collaborating is at the opposite extreme of avoiding. This means the team member is willing to believe that when two parties are at loggerheads, it is possible for both sides to come out with what they want. Collaborating requires developed conflict resolution skills based on mutual respect, a willingness to listen to others, and creativity in finding solutions.

2.2 Past Studies

The past studies discuss issues on class discussions in terms of how they differ across gender. The studies also present the benefits as well as conflicts that may occur.

Gender differences can sometimes influence a class discussion. A study was conducted by Murphy, Eduljee, Parkman and Croteau (2018) to examine the relationship between gender, preferred teaching methods, and classroom participation activities for 73 undergraduate college students. The sample was taken from four clusters of the preferred teaching methods (films, classroom discussion, experiential activities, and student presentations). Findings revealed that male students indicated greater level of agreement than females. Males were said to actively participating more in organised classroom activities compared to the female students. The female students showed higher tendency to volunteer to the instructor’s questions compared to the male students. There were no significant differences between the level of agreement and classroom participation activities.

Differences in opinion can encourage learners to use critical thinking skills. The study by Hurst, Wallace and Nixon (2013) was done to students’ perceptions of the value of the social interaction that was taking place in our classrooms on their learning. The findings reveal that students perceived that social interaction improved their learning by enhancing their knowledge of literacy and teaching and their critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Students are not the only ones who need to be talking and listening to one another while learning; teachers are also expected to steer the discussion towards the required direction.

Nevertheless, class discussions can offer more than just interaction for the learners involved. Chang and Brickman (2018) examined learning performance and group work for 246 students enrolled in an introductory biology course for non– science majors at a large public university in the south eastern United States. The course included two 75-minute classes per week and comprised five different content units. Class time was devoted to providing core content through instructor mini lectures and daily individual and group activities that required students to apply the content to specific situations (Brickman *et al.*, 2012). Individual assignments included clicker questions, pre-class written assignments to prepare for group work, practice tests, and a final unit test composed of multiple-choice questions. Group work included completing in-class worksheets to structure or organize content knowledge (e.g., drawing a diagram, finding relevant resources from websites) as well as outside-class group projects that required students to apply their knowledge (Brickman *et al.*, 2012). In addition to that, after completing unit tests individually, group members collaboratively answered the same test items

again to earn a group test score. The findings revealed that learners gained engagement, content knowledge acquisition, understand concepts, application of acquired knowledge. The students also showed evidence of positive experiences with group members. The groups did not collaborate but merged and submitted outside group work. When the team had contrasting perceptions, their attitude and behaviours negatively influences group activities.

However, group interaction may often lead to conflicts among the team members. Maltarich, Kukenberger, Reilly, and Mathieu (2016) studied 529 individuals in 145 teams. This study addressed inconsistencies in the literature related to the effect of team conflict, specifically task conflict, within teams. The results suggest that task conflict at the end of a team's life cycle, like relationship conflict, can have a significant negative effect on performance. However, this happens only when teams' conflict management approaches are competitive (rather than cooperative). The study also found that conflict management approaches are affected by the type of conflict teams exhibited in their early life cycle stages. Another study Borg, Kembro and Notander (2011) investigated why conflicts arise in student groups at the Faculty of Engineering at Lund University and how teachers managed them. They conducted an exploratory interdepartmental interview study on teachers' views on this matter, interviewing ten university teachers with different levels of seniority. Findings showed that conflicts frequently arise in group work, most commonly caused by different levels of ambition among students. They also found that teachers preferred to work proactively against conflicts and they focus on the student's responsibility. Finally, they showed that teachers at the faculty tend to avoid the more drastic conflict resolution strategies suggested by previous research. Finally, Turnuklu, Kacmaz, Turk, Kalneder, Sevkin and Zengin (2009) examined the effectiveness of Conflict Resolution and Peer Mediation (CRPM) training on resolving 10-11-year-old primary school students' interpersonal conflicts. Research was conducted in two low-SES primary schools. A total of 520 students from 12 classrooms received training. Peer mediation forms filled by the mediator students following the mediation sessions were used to collect data. Of the 444 mediation sessions, 98.9% resulted in agreement and 1.1% in no-agreement. Majority of the conflicts referred to mediation were physical, verbal, and non-verbal violence, relationship and communication conflicts, and conflicts of interest. Results of the study indicated that CRPM training might prove to be effective in resolving 10- 11-year-old students' conflicts.

2.3 Theoretical Framework- The Continuum of Conflict in a Class Discussion

The theoretical framework is rooted from the model by Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilmann (1974) of conflict resolution. Figure 2 shows the continuum of conflict in a class discussion. The mode of the discussion could be from a total disagreement form that looks like the team members are competing towards something. This disagreement may not be total by the team members. The member in disagreement may decide to accommodate some ideas form the opposing team members. Then the team member with the conflict may decide to avoid more conflicts by assimilating the opposing teams' idea into his/her views. The final stage is the stage where the team members worked on a compromise and make the decision to collaborate as a team.

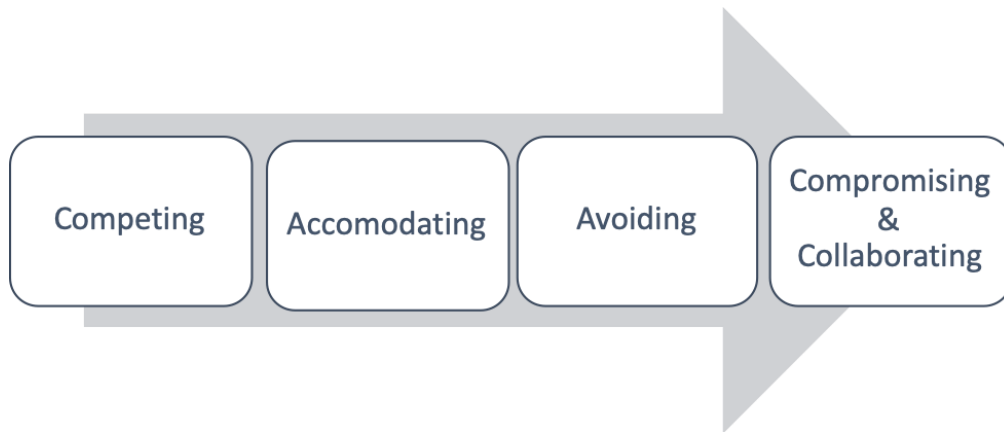


Figure 2. Theoretical Framework of the Study (source- Thomas & Kilman, 1974 & Santrock, 2009)

3. Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This section presents the methodology of the study. Specifically, it discusses the research design, sample, instrument, method of data collection as well as method of data analysis.

3.2 Research Design, Sample and Instrument

This pilot study employs a quantitative design. A survey was given to 164 respondents to explore assimilation and accommodation during class discussions. Respondents were chosen from a public university who signed up for a language proficiency course. The course content focus on class discussions in groups. The instrument used is a questionnaire of 32 items Section A is the demographic profile. Section B looks at learners’ perception on “competing”, section looks at learners’ perceptions on “accommodating”, section D looks at learners’ perception on “avoiding”, while section E looks at learners’ perceptions on “compromising and collaborating”. An analysis of the instrument revealed a score of 0.799 (Table 1) thus showing high level of internal consistency.

Table 1. Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.799	.852	32

3.3 Method of Data Collection and Data Analysis

The questionnaire is converted to google form and respondents answered to the link given at the end of the semester after learners have completed their class discussion. Data collected is analysed using SPSS to reveal mean scores and independent t-test scores.

4. Findings

4.1 Introduction

This section presents the findings according to the research questions presented below. Mean scores are used to present the findings for perception of students towards class discussions and conflict resolution. The presentation begins with findings for perception of class discussion among learners. Next, the presentation of findings for conflict resolution is sub-divided into perception (i) on competition, (ii) accommodation, (iii) avoidance, and (iv) compromise and collaborate. Finally, the presentation of findings focusses on finding out if there are any significant differences for class discussions and conflict resolution.

How do learners perceive class discussions?

- (a) How do learners perceive competition in class discussions?
- (b) How do learners perceive accommodation in class discussions?
- (c) How do learners avoid conflicts in class discussions?
- (d) How do learners compromise and collaborate in class discussions?
- (e) Are there any significance difference for class discussions and conflict resolution across gender?

4.2 Class Discussion

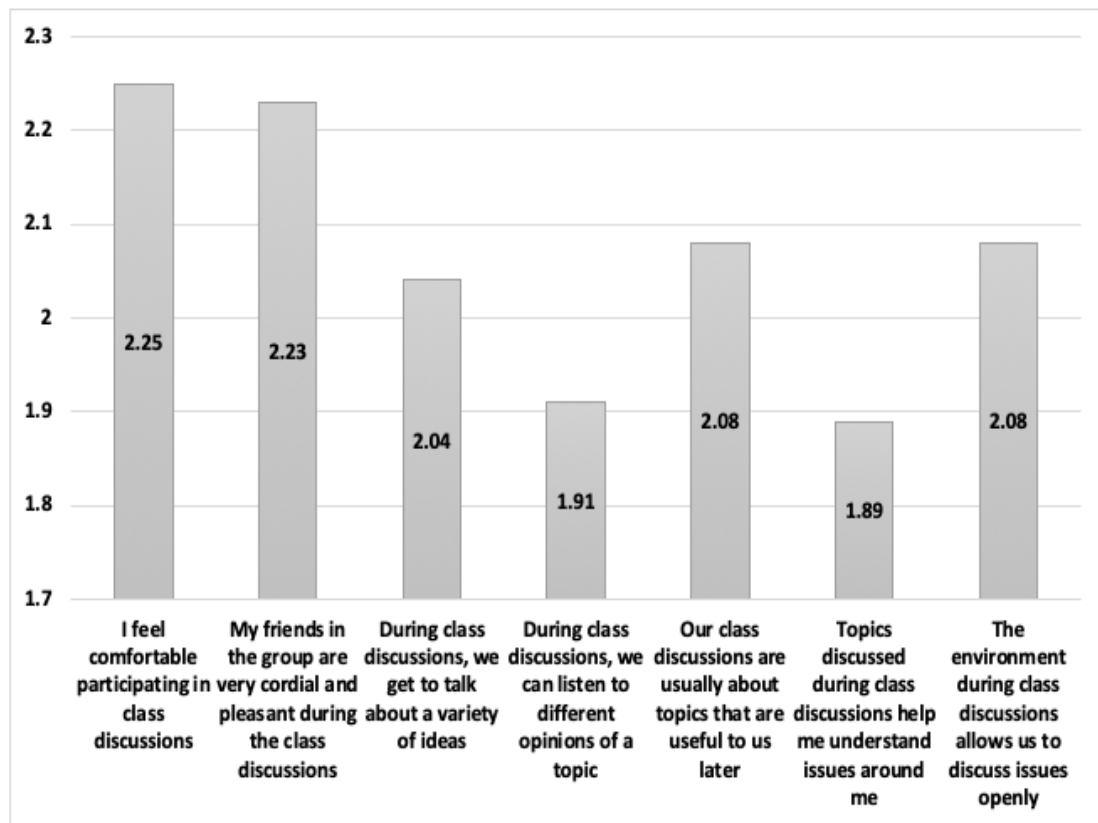


Figure 3. Mean Score for Class Discussions

This section reports findings for research question 1;

How do learners perceive class discussions?

Figure 3 shows the mean scores for group discussion overall. Generally, learners felt comfortable participating in class discussions (2.25). Interestingly, they were not very positive towards listening to different opinions on a topic (1.91) in a group discussion.

4.3 Competing

This section reports findings for research question 2;

How do learners perceive competition in class discussions?

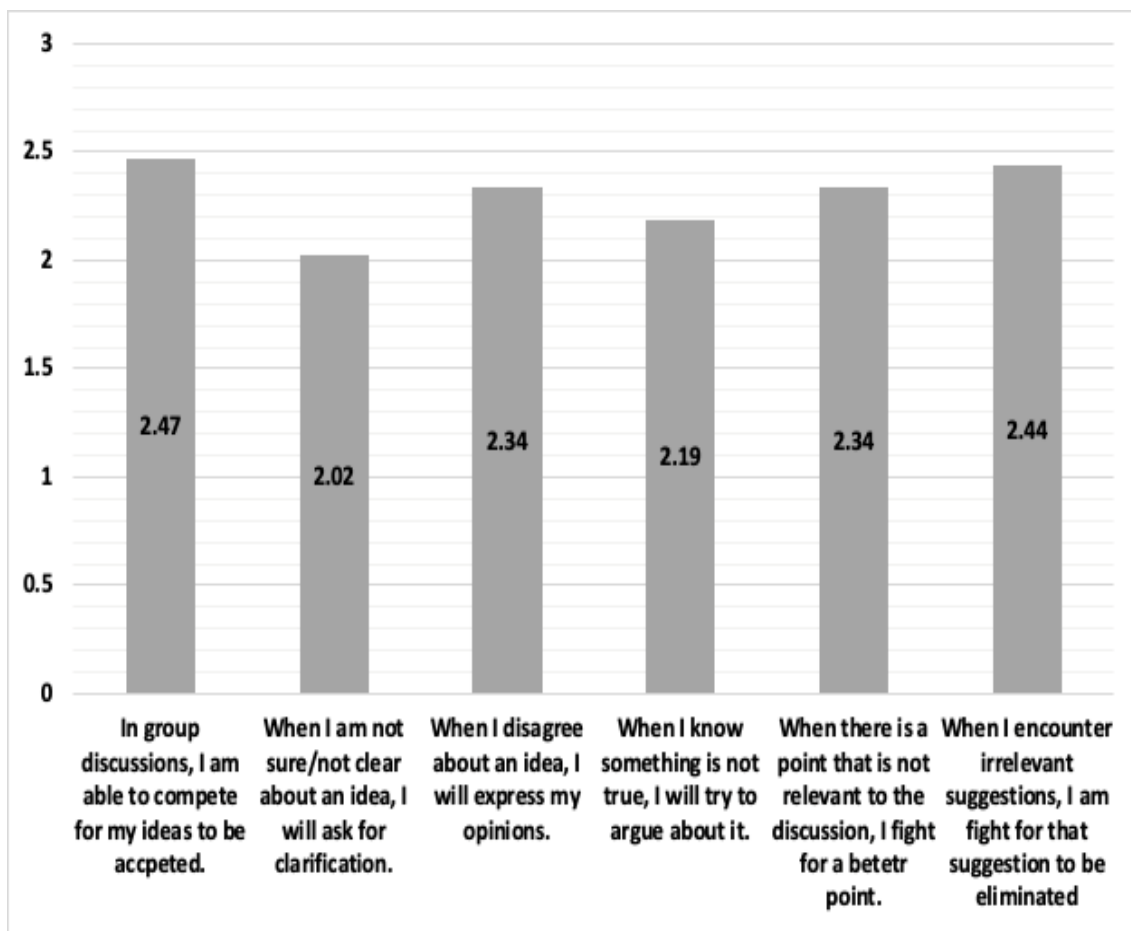


Figure 4. Mean for Competing

Figure 4 shows the mean scores for “competing”. The highest mean reported is when learners felt they were “able to compete for” (2.47) for their ideas to be accepted in the group. Interestingly, the second highest mean is when learners fought for “irrelevant suggestions to be eliminated” (2.44). This “competing” mode is seen when learners use argumentative and

persuasive skills to compete with a team member whose ideas they wanted to eliminate.

4.4 Accommodating

This section reports findings for research question 3;

How do learners avoid accommodating in class discussions?

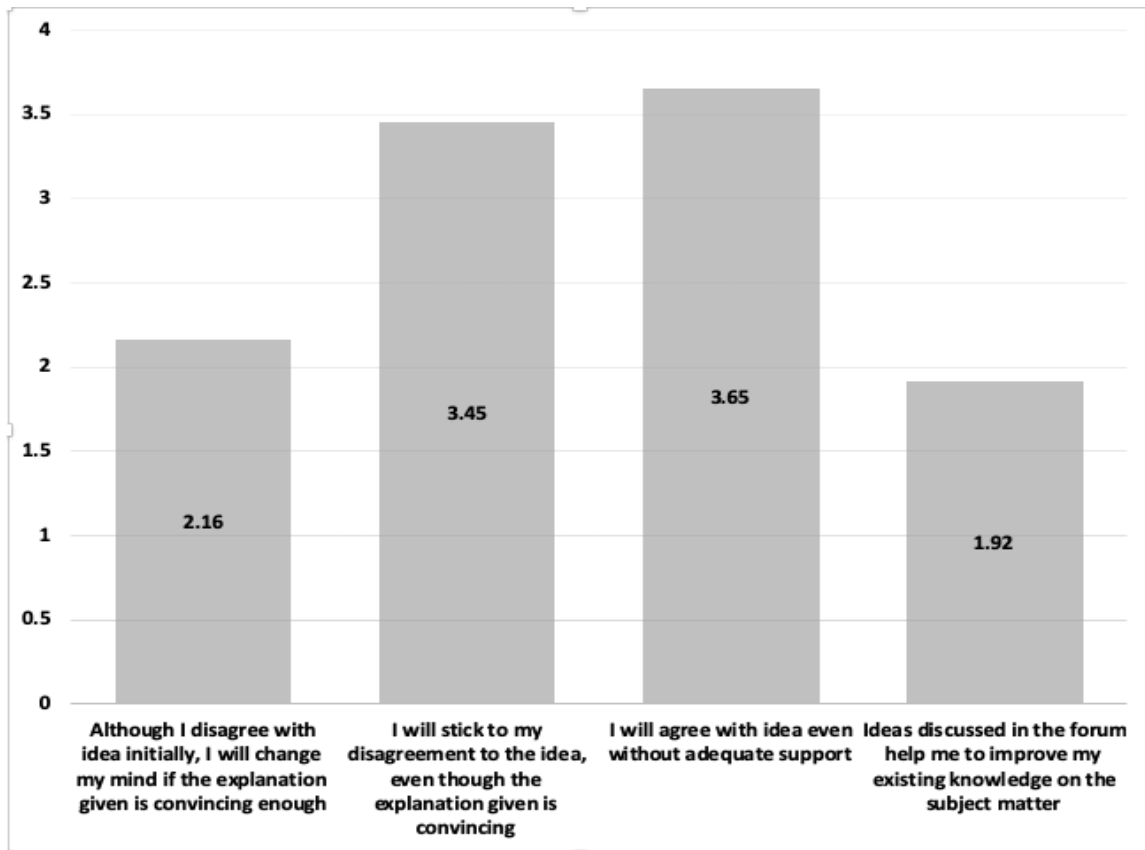


Figure 5. Mean Score for Accommodating

Figure 5 shows the mean scores for “accommodating”. Interestingly, the highest mean score is for “agree with the idea even without adequate support” (3.65). Sometimes team members attempt to “avoid” disagreement to new ideas by agreeing without and reservation.

4.5 Avoiding

This section reports findings for the research question 4;

How do learners perceive “avoiding” in class discussions?

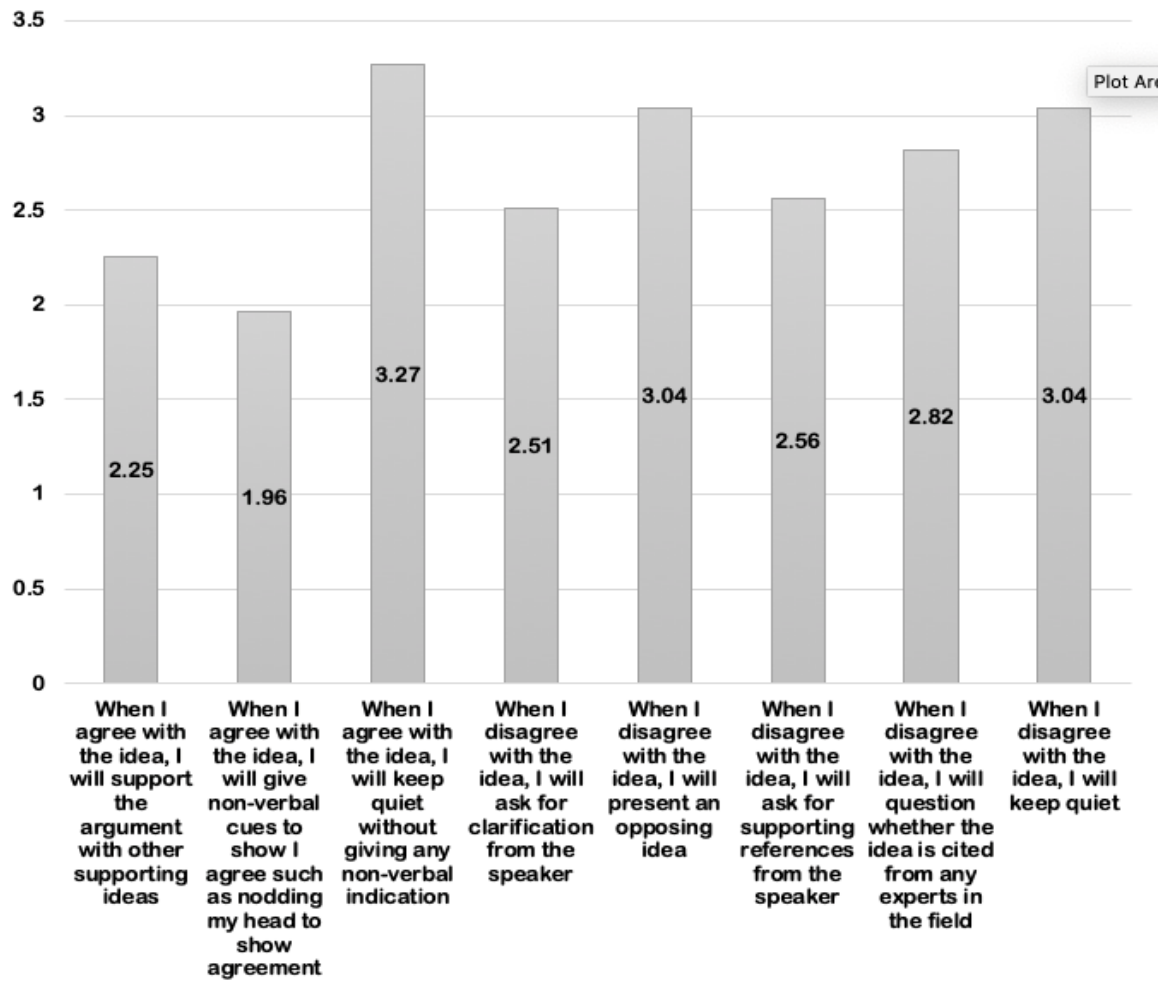


Figure 6. Mean Score for Avoiding

Figure 6 presents the mean scores for “avoiding”. Results indicated the high mean score for “keeping quiet to show agreement” (3.27) and also “keeping quiet for disagreement” (3.04).

4.6 Compromising and Collaborating

This section reports findings for the research question 5;

How do learners perceive “compromising and collaborating” in class discussions?

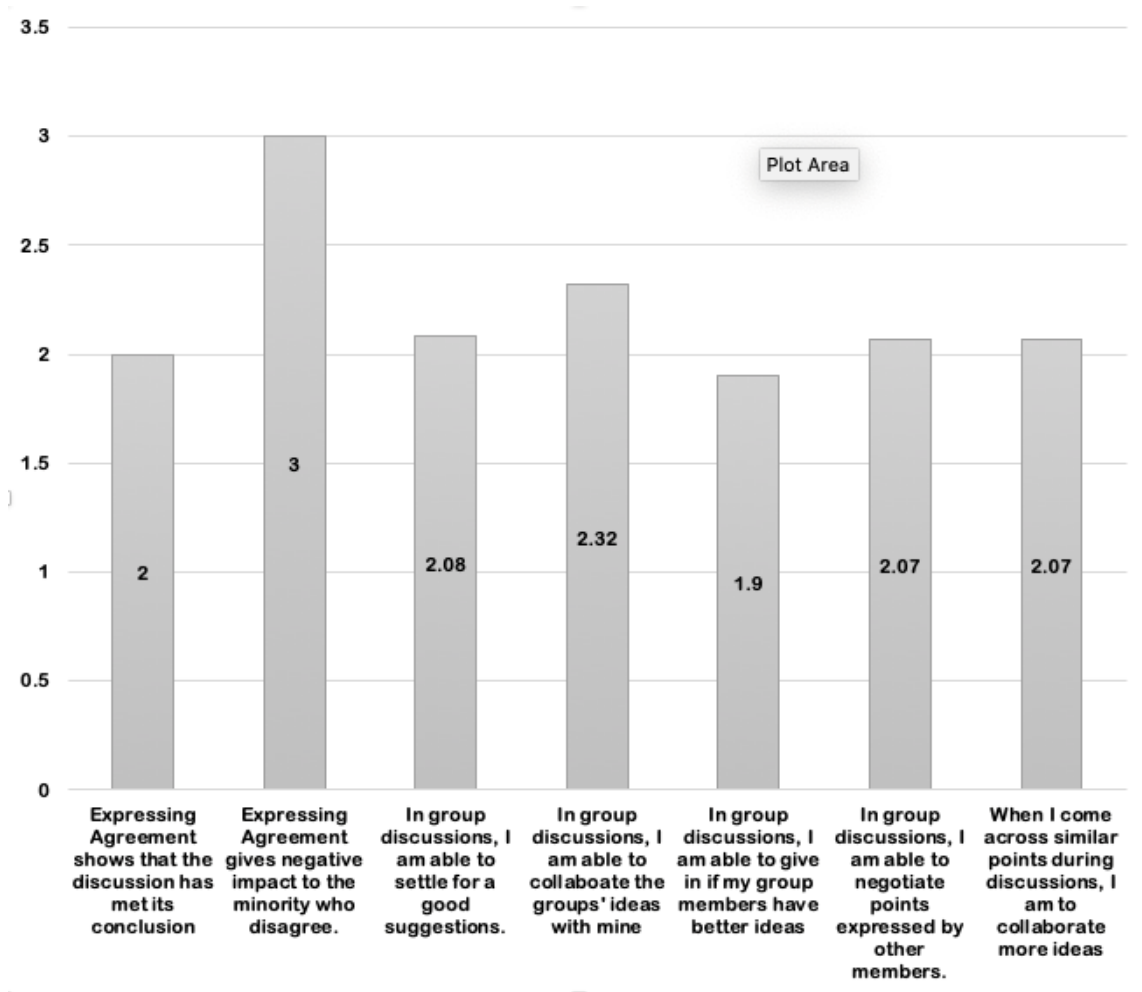


Figure 7. Mean Score for “Compromising and Collaborating”

Figure 7 presents the findings for “Compromising and Collaborating” in terms of mean scores. The highest mean (3) is for “expressing agreement shows the discussion has met with its conclusion.” This somewhat shows the willingness of the team to compromise to a conclusion. The lowest mean (1.9) is for “ability to give in if group members have better ideas”. This shows that they are not willing to give in if one member has a better idea.

4.7 Class Discussions and Conflict Resolution across Gender

This section provides answers to research question 5:

Are there any significance difference for class discussions and conflict resolution across gender? The question is answered in by looking at finding for (a) class discussion and (b) conflict resolution.

4.7.1 Class Discussion

Table 2. Results of Independent T- Test Comparing Male and Female in Class Discussion

Results		Independent T-Test				
		<i>n</i>	\bar{x}	SD	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Class Discussion	Male	55	11.70	3.46	-1.65	.10
	Female	107	12.58	3.13		

*T-test significant is at .05 (2 tailed)

Table 2 indicates the result of mean score and standard deviation between male and female on class discussion. The mean score for male ($\bar{x} = 11.70$) and female ($\bar{x} = 12.58$). The Independent T-Test comparing between male and female reported that there was no statistically significant difference in the mean score ($t(160) = -1.65$, $p = .10$) at the 0.05 level. This means both male and female students perceive class discussion in the same way.

4.7.2 Conflict Resolution

The presentation for conflict resolution is further sub-categorized into (i) competing, (ii) accommodating, (iii) avoiding, and (iv) compromising and collaborating.

4.7.2.1 Competing

Table 3. Competing Results of Independent T- Test Comparing Male and Female in “Competing”

Results		Independent T-Test				
		<i>n</i>	\bar{x}	SD	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Disagreement	Male	55	10.71	3.10	-2.41	.02
	Female	110	11.92	2.92		

*T-test significant is at .05 (2 tailed)

Table 3 indicates the result of mean score and standard deviation between male and female on “competing”. The mean score for male ($\bar{x} = 10.71$) and female ($\bar{x} = 11.92$). The mean score for “competing” is higher than women. This means female learners have higher tendency to “compete” compared to male learners. The Independent T-Test comparing between male and female reported that there was significantly difference in the mean score ($t(163) = -2.41$, $p = .02$) at the 0.05 level.

4.7.2.2 Accommodating

Table 4. “Accommodating” across Gender Results of Independent T- Test Comparing Male and Female in “Accommodating”

Results		Independent T-Test				
		<i>n</i>	\bar{x}	SD	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Accommodation	Male	45	9.54	1.62	-1.48	.14
	Female	92	9.98	1.61		

**T*-test significant is at .05 (2 tailed)

Table 4 indicates the result of mean score and standard deviation between male and female on “Accommodating”. The mean score for male ($\bar{x} = 9.54$) and female ($\bar{x} = 9.98$). Again, the mean scores for “Accommodating” is higher among women than men. However, the Independent T-Test comparing between male and female reported that there was no statistically significant difference in the mean score ($t(135) = -1.48$), $p = .14$) at the 0.05 level.

4.7.2.3 Avoiding

Table 5. “Avoiding” across Gender Results of Independent T- Test Comparing Male and Female in “Avoiding”

Results		Independent T-Test				
		<i>n</i>	\bar{x}	SD	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Assimilation	Male	63	16.23	5.26	-2.89	.004
	Female	140	18.98	6.68		

**T*-test significant is at .05 (2 tailed)

Table 5 indicates the result of mean score and standard deviation between male and female for “Avoiding”. The mean score for male ($\bar{x} = 16.23$) and female ($\bar{x} = 18.98$). The Independent T-Test comparing between male and female reported that there was significantly difference in the mean score ($t(201) = -2.89$), $p = .004$) at the 0.05 level. The mean score for “Avoiding” among women is higher than men. This means the ability to “Avoiding” are higher than men.

4.7.2.4 Compromising and Collaborating

Table 6. “Compromise and Collaborate” across gender *Results of Independent T- Test comparing male and female in “Compromise and Collaborate”*

Results		Independent T-Test				
		<i>n</i>	\bar{x}	SD	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Agreement	Male	55	13.07	3.38	-.78	.44
	Female	109	13.45	2.82		

**T-test significant is at .05 (2 tailed)*

Table 6 indicates the result of mean score and standard deviation between male and female on “Compromise and Collaborate”. The mean score for male ($\bar{x} = 13.07$) and female ($\bar{x} = 13.45$). The mean score for women is higher for men. The Independent T-Test comparing between male and female reported that there was no statistically significant difference in the mean score ($t(162) = -.78, p = .44$) at the 0.05 level.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Summary of Findings and Discussion

The findings revealed that learners perceived that class discussions required them to listen to different opinion. Interestingly, the type of listening that the learners in this study had in mind was not that of passive listening. However, they felt they needed to “compete” with the other team members to get their ideas accepted. Nevertheless, they could accommodate their team members to a certain extent. This is shown by the fact that they attempted to avoid disagreements. Finally, the learners displayed agreement in the team when they wanted to indicate that the discussion has met with a conclusion, although they were reluctant to give in to team members who had better ideas than them.

5.2 Discussion

Conflict is expected to occur in class discussions. However, what is more important is how the team members dealt with the conflict. The respondents may begin by competing with others to get their voices heard; but, this effort to “win” is a lesson in itself for the members in team. According to Rahmat (2011), class discussion helped learners discover knowledge in the group. This knowledge may not only relate to the content of the discussion, but can also relate to the awareness of being more critical in their thinking and become more persuasive in their presentation of ideas.

The skills of “agree to disagree” is emphasized in class discussions. Learners may initially fight to get their ideas accepted; yet, they ended up compromising their ideas to suit the team’s ideas. This is also agreed by Carrasco and Irribarra (2018) who also found that learners gained more than just interaction. They gained knowledge and also skills of negotiation and compromising. They said that the more exposure to class discussion would improve learners’ ability to be open-minded and accept the view of others.

Findings in this study revealed that both genders perceive class discussion in the same way. This finding is in accordance with the findings by Murphy, Eduljee, Parkman and Croteau (2018) who also reported no significance differences for classroom participation across gender. However, their study also reported isolated agreement and disagreement skills that showed some differences. This study also revealed significant differences for the perception of “competing” among male and female participants. Similarly, the study by Victoria (2017) also showed that different genders displayed different communication styles in group discussions. Next, this finding revealed that female learners can “accommodate” more compared to men.

This finding is again confirmed when the female learners reported to attempt “avoidance” more compared to men. This is to avoid conflicts. This finding is in accordance with the finding by Murphy, Eduljee, Parkman and Croteau (2018) who also reported that women avoided discussions.

5.3 Limitations of the Study

The findings of this study is limited only to learners discussion in the context of learning English as a second language. Learners may be seen as non-participative but in actual fact they could be struggling in the usage of the language. In addition to that, more (or less) conflict may occur based on the topic chosen by the instructor.

5.4 Pedagogical Implications

Group discussion are bound to contain conflicts. It is not interesting to see all team members listening attentively or passively and agreeing to everything said by the team members. However, it would also take up much time if conflicts during class discussions were allowed to prolong. The instructor can step to re-aligned the discussion when the arguments became too strong. Conflicts in discussions help build critical thinking skills among participants. In addition to that, conflicts help learners to improve on their argumentative and persuasive skills to get their ideas accepted. According to Santrock (2009), Vygotsky’s social constructivism mentioned that group interaction allows participants to construct their own knowledge while still accommodating their own ideas into the discussion.

5.5 Suggestions for Future Research

It is suggested that future researcher looked into what and how discussions take place. This can be done through recordings of the conversations and conduction a qualitative study on the discourse analysis of the data.

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