

**EXPERIENCES OF ABILITY GROUPING
(A CASE STUDY AT ENGLISH EDUCATION DEPARTMENT
UIN ANTASARI)**

Nani Hizriani

nanihjrani@yahoo.com

Saadillah

Saadillahelhady302@gmail.com

Puji Sri Rahayu

p.rahayu@gmail.com

Antasari State Islamic University of Banjarmasin, Indonesia

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Corresponding Author:

nanihjrani@yahoo.com

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Ability grouping is a common educational practice which is intended to improve education quality by grouping students together according to their achievements. This research focuses on the attitude and believes of the students and lecturers of English Education Department toward grouping ability in term of confidence, achievement, expectation, competition, cooperation and respect. This is a descriptive qualitative research since it is used to gain an understanding of underlying reasons, opinions, and motivations. The respondents of this research were students of academic year 2016, 2017 and 2018 and the lecturers. To collect the data, English proficiency test, questionnaires, and interview were used as the instruments. The findings from questionnaire and interviews mostly shows positive attitudes and believes toward ability grouping both from the students and the lecturers being investigated. There is little issue about respect experienced by some lecturers, yet, it is inconclusive. From the result,

it is suggested that lecturers need to adjust materials, select appropriate techniques and methods to suit the students' characteristics.

INTRODUCTION

Ability grouping has long been controversial issue in education. The educational practice of ability grouping emerged around the turn of the 20th century as a way to prepare students for their "appropriate" place in the workforce (Cooper, 1996). Students with high abilities and skills were given intense, rigorous academic training while students with lower abilities were given a vocational education. It is also often described as sorting students by their aptitude in a particular discipline for instruction, is said to be a practical solution developed to address the demands of disparate abilities in classrooms (DiGennaro, 2013). According to Zhang et al., (2014) ability grouping is a common educational practice that is intended to improve education quality by reducing the heterogeneity of instructional groups and providing different interventions to diverse population with diverse abilities and needs. Identifying the achievement effect of ability grouping is critically important for two reasons. First, ability grouping is closely related to the subject of contextual effect, which is included in the general research field of school effect. Second, ability grouping is found to reproduce the inequalities of the society by providing inferior education to students in the lower tracks (Strike, 2007), a concern that must be carefully evaluated from the perspective of education equity. The opponent of ability grouping contended that ability grouping not only fails to benefit any student, but it also channels poor and minority students to low tracks where they receive a lower quality of instruction than other groups. This, they claimed, contributes to a widening of the achievement gaps.

There have been lots of studies in ability grouping but mostly done for elementary education. This study will be different from other studies. The ability grouping in this study is applied in university. Since 2011, English Education Department in UIN Antasari Banjarmasin has a policy to group the students based on their English Proficiency score. This policy begins from several considerations.

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First, it is due to the enrolment test for English Education Dept's students. The test for new students is not specific measuring their English Ability. As a result, there is big gap between students in term of their English Ability and make it difficult for them to equally participating in class activities. Second, since the gap is too wide between students, lecturers also experience difficulty in teaching. Some students are absorbing the material too fast and some others are hard to catch up. Third is to make sure that every student gets material and master it equally even though the pace is different.

After six years implementing the ability grouping class, the evaluation of the policy is needed. This study attempts to assess the policy by looking at the experience of students and teachers in term of the attitude and believes toward grouping ability in term of confidence, achievement, expectation, competition, cooperation and respect.

This research aims to analyze the attitude and believes of the students and lecturers toward grouping ability in term of confidence, achievement, expectation, competition, cooperation and respect.

Ability grouping is defined as "some means of grouping students for instruction by ability or achievement in order to reduce their heterogeneity" Slavin, (1990). This practice places students of similar academic level within the same group for instruction. Moreover, Zhang et al., (2014) described ability grouping as a common educational practice that is intended to improve the quality of education by reducing the heterogeneity of instructional groups and providing various interventions to diverse population with different abilities and needs. In other words, it is a practice which divides the students on the basis of their similar learning capacities to improve the quality of education.

According to Aydin & Ilker (2005), Viar (2008), O & O (2011), there are some benefits of grouping ability, they are as follows:

1. Lecturers will be more efficient when planning the lesson. Curriculum and lesson planning can be directed at the target audience to adjust the pace of

learning in the classroom. Grouping ability obviously helps lecturers to adjust materials and method of instruction to suit the need and level of the students to adjust materials and method of instruction to suit the need and level of the students. This practice leads to easier classroom management which allows lecturers for more time spend on lesson preparation.

2. Lecturers will be easier to teach as they can provides more repetitive and reinforcement to the low-achievers and provide more an advanced level of instruction to the high achievers.
3. Low achieving students feel more comfortable and participate more when they are grouped with peers of similar or same ability. They do not get frustrated by the progress of high ability students since students can work at a faster or slower pace without being discouraged within the group of same ability level they belong
4. The high achievers can move faster without having to slow down for their less competent friends. They seem to value their comfort and ability to participate in the group work in the level they belong. They can learn more in homogeneous classes.
5. Ability grouping may reduce the luxury of time, space and materials involved in individualized instruction. So, students will be able to optimize their learning.
6. This practice can reduce discipline problems occur in homogeneous classes.

According to Slavin and Braddock (1993) cited in Aydin & Ilker, (2005) grouping by ability is ineffective. This practice is risky to many students and inhibits the development of multicultural respect, understanding, and friendship. Their arguments against ability grouping can be summarized as follows:

1. Students in low-ability groups have different opportunities to learn. One of the clearest outcomes of ability grouping at all instructional levels is that are exposed to substantially less material and to lower quality instruction than are students in middle-or high ability groups.

2. Ability grouping fail to meet equity in which the effectiveness of grouping sacrifices the needs of low achievers in favour of the high achievers.
3. Low achieving students are likely to be exposed to more low-level skills than are students in middle and high groups.
4. The classes have disproportionate numbers of students from the same racial or social groups
5. The feelings of inferiority and worthlessness may be the outcome the students in low achieving groups

Students in the low track are still more likely to be delinquent than are other students and are less likely to complete their education.

METHOD

This is a descriptive qualitative research since it is used to gain an understanding of underlying reasons, opinions, and motivations. The goal of descriptive qualitative research is to give a thorough and accurate account of a specific phenomenon or event. Qualitative research explores the subjective experiences, viewpoints, and interpretations of people or groups, in contrast to quantitative research, which is more concerned with numerical data and statistical analysis (Kim et al., 2016).

The data of this study were collected through questionnaire and interview. The questionnaire is administered to all English Department Students and 251 students filled it. To confirm the data, interview is also conducted to both students and Lecturers. Then, the data analysed by India, (2019) finding patterns and concepts to explain, comprehend, or interpret an event, situation, or population under investigation is the act of making sense of the data that has been gathered. It is the analysis and interpretation of significant and symbolic facts.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

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After the data from questionnaire and interview were gathered and analysed, the researchers found emerging themes related to the attitudes and believes of students and lecturers toward grouping ability. The questionnaire was distributed to all English department students and there were 251 students answered the questionnaire. To begin with, the students of English Education Department are grouped based on their English proficiency levels as described at the figure below:

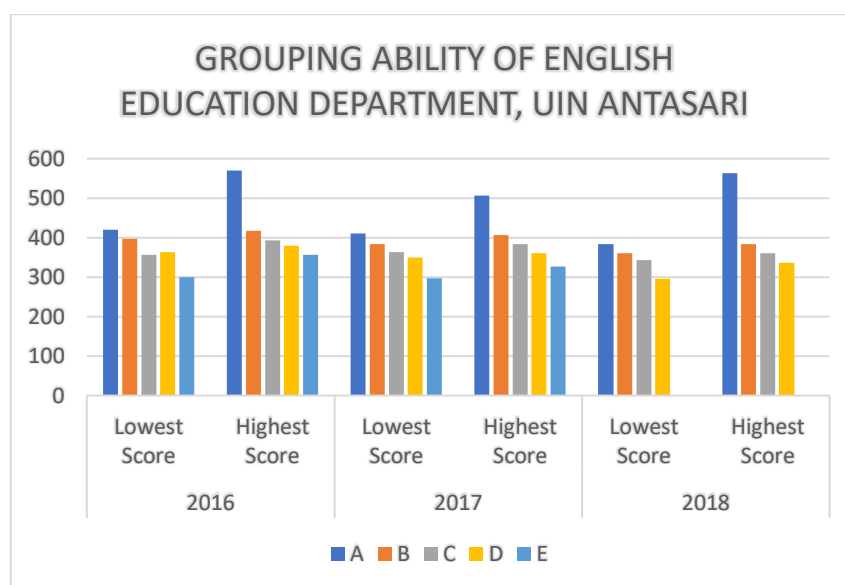


Figure 1. Ability grouping classes academic year 2016, 2017, and 2018.

The graphic showed the current situation of the students. The range of English Proficiency test of Class A students of Academic year 2016 is 420-570. As for class A students of Academic year 2017 is 410-507 and 383-563 class A 2018. The number of participants participated from each academic year can be seen in the following figure:

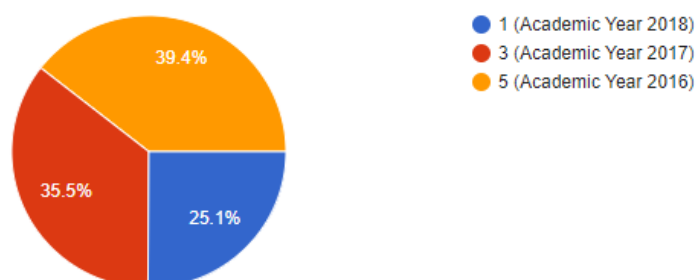


Figure 2. Numbers of participants.

The participants from 2018 were 63 students, 89 from 2017 and 99 from 2016. The result of research was organized based on the research problem and categorized into six major areas below:

Confidence

There are several questions addressed the issues of confidence in ability-based classes. The first issue asked was about the students' opinion about ability grouping. 51% students agreed this kind of class motivated them to study harder and 28 % of them stated that it increases their confidence in learning. However, few of students (less than 7%) mentioned that it decreased their confidence and separates them from their friends. In the interview session, students who stated that it decreased their confidence further explained that their classmates are smart and made them feeling inferior. Those who mentioned that ability grouping separated them from their friends felt that in new class, no one understands them.

8. In my opinion, Ability grouping...

251 responses

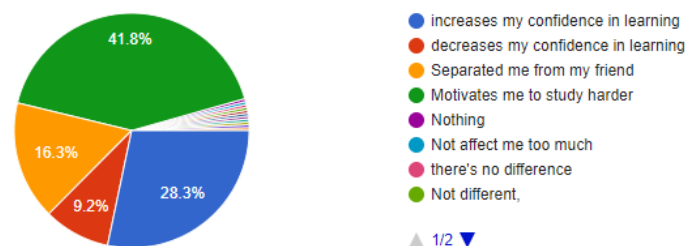


Figure 3. Opinion about Ability Grouping

The second issue asked is whether or not they feel comfortable and belong to the class. Most of the students participated in this study strongly agree and agree that they feel comfortable with their classes

9. I am very comfortable with my class now

251 responses

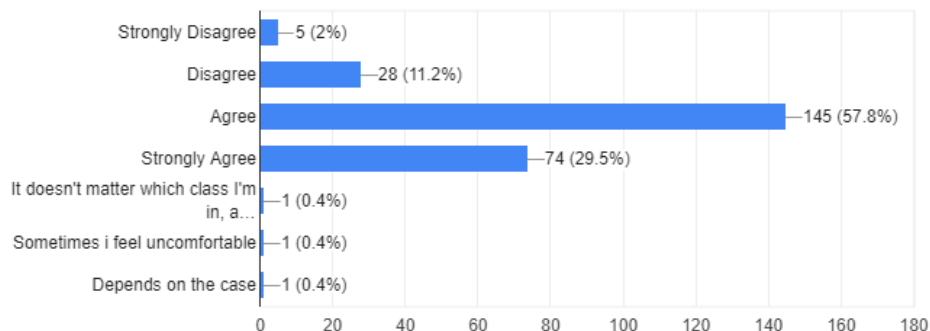


Figure 4. Participants' feeling

Few students felt uncomfortable because they thought they belong to the lower ability class. In the interview session, students revealed that after they found out their group of class, they felt devastated. They even asked to the department to put them back in previous group. However, after a while, they mostly admitted that they enjoyed their new classes and new classmates. Student C put it:

“ When I found out my class is A, I felt so bad. My best friend is in other class. We were inseparable. I do all assignments with her. I was afraid that my friends in new class were not nice and must be individualistic since they are smart. However, after a month, I felt so happy to be in this class. All my classmates are cool and we work together nicely. “

I do not think I belong to this class

251 responses

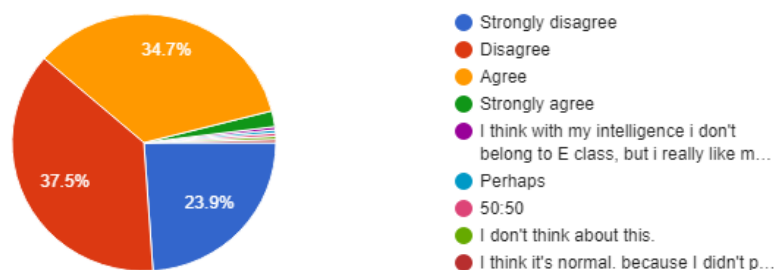


Figure 5. Comfortability and sense of belonging in Class

The confidence on learning in ability grouping was confirmed by their responses which stated that they strongly agree (25%) and agree (58%) that they become more confidence in learning with their classes now.

This finding is interesting as for some researches (Zomparelli et al., 2007) suggested that mixed ability students have higher confidence than homogenous group. This study suggests that most students from all different level of classes agree that ability-based class (ability grouping) increase their confidence in learning. This is showed by their active participation in class (chart 6).

10. I am actively taking part in Classroom discussion and activities.

251 responses

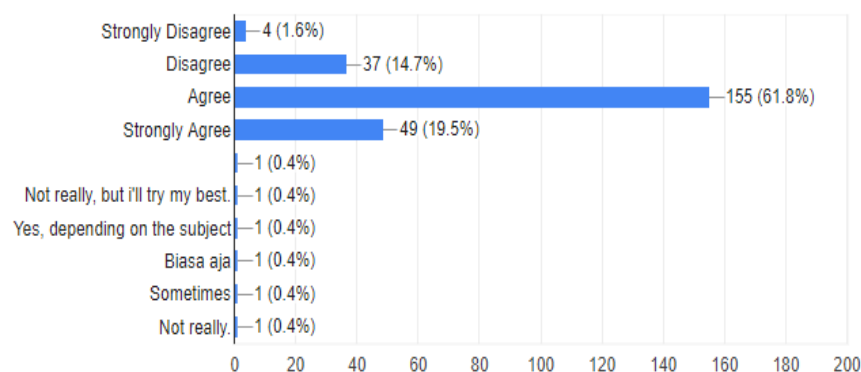


Figure 6. Participation in Class

Besides students, the researchers also interviewed the English education lecturers to see how their perspective toward ability grouping. When most of students from different level of classes revealed that they gain more confidence in learning, lecturers, when asked about students' confidence in learning, most said that class rank A, B, and C have higher self confidence in the classroom compared to class D and E. Lecturer A explained that in Class A, when it comes to Q & A session or discussion, the students are very active to participate in the session. Lecturer B described students of Class A as overconfidence students. Lecturer B stated as below:

“I know students of class A are pretty smart. They can catch up with the material well. However, I feel that more than half of the students are over

confidence. When I give them assignments, for example presentation, most groups did not come for consultation regarding the presentation. I thought that they understood the topic well so that they did not come. But I was disappointed because they did not perform well. Lots of flaws in their presentation. They have the ability but do not want to challenge themselves for more challenging things.”

Meanwhile, in Class D and E, the students are pretty quiet so that lecturers have to work harder to make them taking active participation. This quietness is defined as low self- confidence by lecturers.

Achievement

The second issue related to attitudes and beliefs being addressed is achievement. Collin English dictionary defines achievement as something which someone has succeeded in doing. In this study, it might be an increase in GPA or English Proficiency score and other academic achievement. A study by Kulik, (2007) found that ability grouping gave significant effect on academic achievement in high ability classes rather than in average classes. Some lecturers also shared the same beliefs as evidence by Kulik, (2007). They sated that ability grouping will not affect the achievement of students from average classes much. However, when the researchers interviewed other lecturers about this, 6 out 10 strongly believe that grouping ability will help students growing. This is due to the reason that lecturers will try to adjust their teaching pace with students’ ability. Among the reasons stated by the lecturers below:

“ I like teaching the low level classes. They seem slow in understanding the material and I have to adjust with them but I see that they really tried so hard to be better. They always try the best they can with the assignment I gave them and come to consult when they did not understand. Therefore, I have faith in them.”

“ The achievement is pretty relative from class to class. However, in many aspects, the lower classes gained better achievement than the higher ones because the students tend to be more persistent and diligent.”

“ If the students of class A, B, C, D and E work harder, of course they will be rewarded with better GPA”.

More than 200 hundred students across the classes (from the high-average-low ability classes) believe that they will achieve better outcome this semester because the lecturers can adjust the teaching pace and provide better guide for them. However, few students think that their achievement will be lower or just the same as previous semester. In further interview session, these students admitted that no matter how hard their study, they still cannot use English well.

“I think my GPA will be worse this semester. No matter how hard I try, I still think that English is very difficult.”

Expectation

The next issue discussed is the expectation of the students toward the lecturers with the grouping ability kind of classes and the other way around. Some studies Aydin & Ilker, (2005), Viar, (2008), O & O, 2011), found that ability grouping would work well when teachers can adjust the teaching techniques as well as the materials. In this study, the researchers investigated the expectation of the students as well as the lecturers. It is found out that more and less 95 % students expect the lecturers to understand their interests, talent and their classes. They really appreciate if lecturers can give assignment, facilitate the classes based on the ability so that the assignment and the activities will be different across the classes. 4 % of the students disagree with the reason that it will be too much to expect the lecturers to understand them one by one. This 4 % opinion is agreed by the majority of lecturers. More than half of lecturers stated that they teach the classes the same way regardless the ability grouping. Yet, they slow down the teaching pace for average to lower classes as stated below:

“It’s impossible for me to understand all students’ interests or to differentiate and varied all activities from class to class. I have many classes to teach. What I can do is slowing down the pace of teaching. If in class A and B, I can finish one topic in one meeting, in other classes, it probably takes two meetings. That the best I can do”

13. I hope that the teachers are able to understand my interest and talent as well as my class.

251 responses

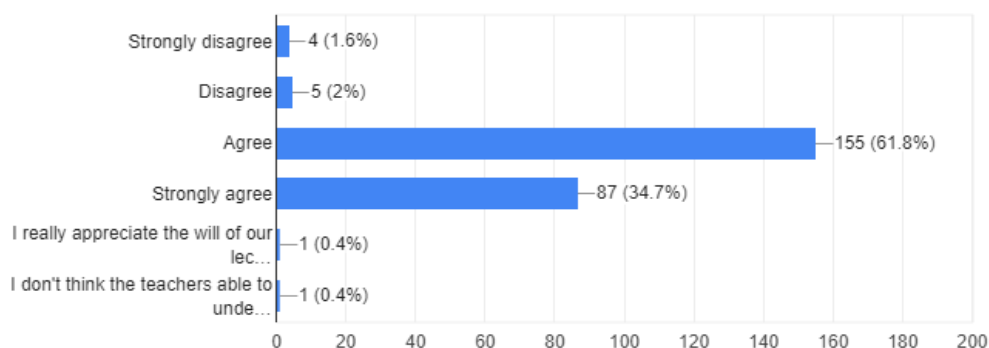


Figure 7. Students' Expectation

Competition

The fourth issue addressed is competition. A study by Thiemann, (2017) showed that the students' achievement in grouping ability is higher in competitive culture class. The findings of this study showed that more than 80 % students agree that they do their task best when they try to do better than other. Furthermore, around 87 % out of 251 students also stated that they are very happy if their scores are higher than their fellows. In other words, they work best in competition. However, in interview session, the result is a little bit different. Ten students being interviewed asserted that they did not like competition. They merely do the assignment without too much thinking on whether it is better that their fellows'. In the interview session with the lecturers, the lecturers stated that there is little competition between students:

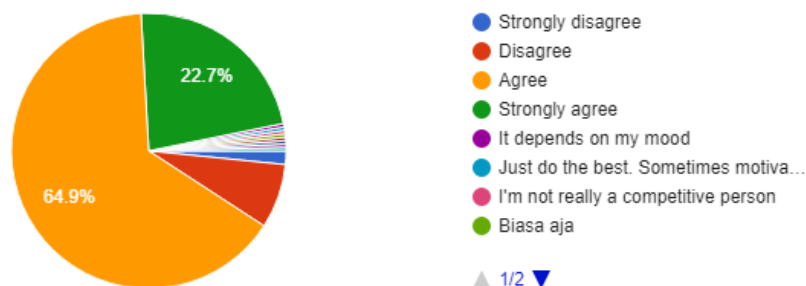
“ I do not see their competitiveness in the classroom. If they can do the assignment the same as other friends, they will do it”.

“ There is competitive in class but it is only a little. They tend to do the assignment as it is. No more no less!”

“ Class B is moderately competitive. They always try to show their best.

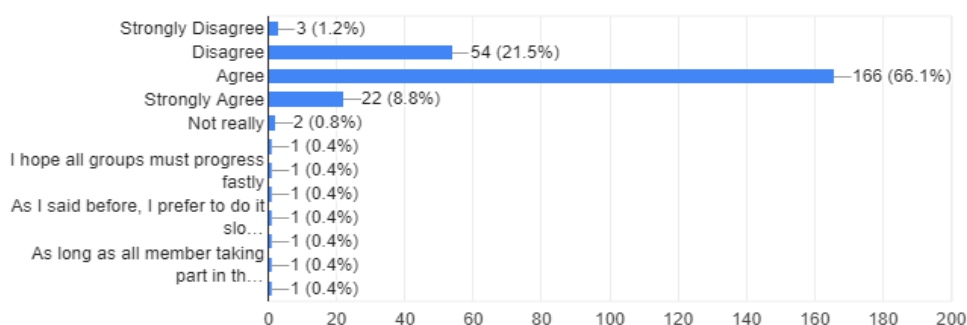
15. I do my task best when I try to do better than others

251 responses



17. If I work in a group, my group must progress faster than other groups.

251 responses



16. I will be very happy if my test grade is better than others

251 responses

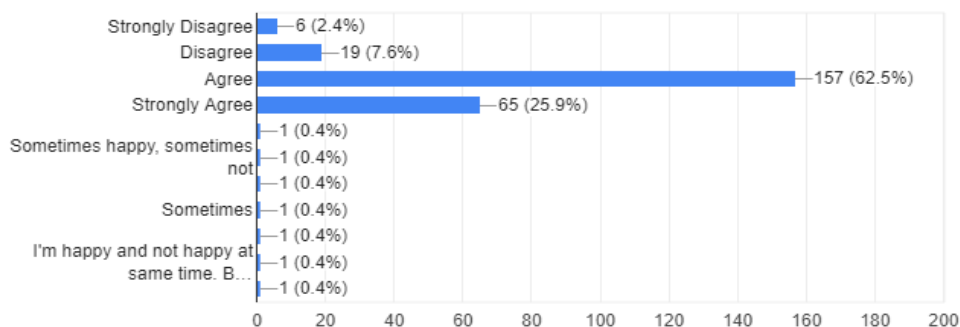


Figure 8. Competitiveness

Cooperation

Regardless the ability grouping, all classes showed similar trend. Most students love to work in group or in pair (71%). It is also interesting to note 22.7% students enjoy working individually. Moreover, those who love to work individually, in further analysis are from the average class students (class C). In interview session, these students admitted that it's hard for them to work in group

because they cannot always share their ideas. Let alone if there is a dominant person in the group. Some of Lecturers, when being interviewed, mentioned that groups do not work well in class A but it does in the rest of the classes. Lecturer D said:

“Better to give individual assignment in Class A. They cannot work together. they tend to wait one student to do it and work on it in very last mins. You can guess the result”. It might because they cannot compromise the different idea comes up in the group. They’d better to work alone.”

14. In my class,

251 responses

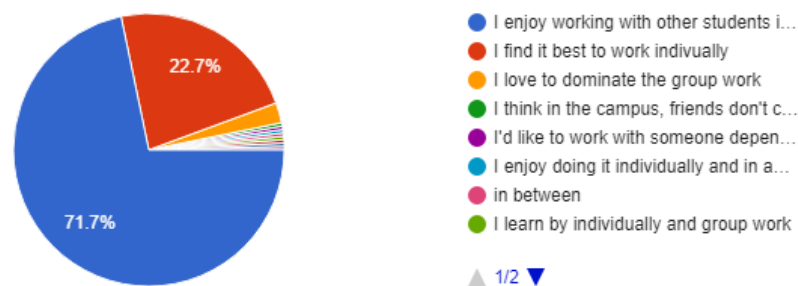


Figure 9. Cooperation

Respect

The issue discussed is respect. In the interview sessions with lecturers, there were some complains about the students’ attitude of class A. Some lecturers said that

“ I don’t know it is because they are in class A or other factor, but I felt that they do not give enough respect to their lecturer. When I explain thing, they seem to listen, yet, I know they do something else. Like doing assignment of other subjects or checking their phones”

“ I don’t feel comfortable teaching in class A. They are very loud. They keep talking even when I have started the class so that I have to rise my voice. They like to jump in in the middle of the explanation.

The other classes, according to the lecturers are manageable, show good respect and easy to work with, even though, sometimes the classes (D , E) are very quiet.

However, the result of questionnaire showed that most of the students (67.3%) said that they keep listening to the lecture despite their unlikeliness to the way lecturers explaining the lesson. Apart from that, it is interesting to note that 21.9% students who like to talk to friends sitting next to them, and other 7.2% who check social media and disturbing friend are students from class A. This fact seems to confirm what the lecturers said in interview session. This is also revealed in interview session with students from different classes. Student K from class A said

“one of my lecturers speaks so softly every time he explains the lesson. It made me so bored. I could not listen to the voice. So, I just check my FB, IG and others in the classroom. My friends do the same thing”

Student F from class E said that

“I could listen to my lecturer voice but I still try my best. I paid attention even I did not understand almost all.”

18. When my teacher explains the lesson and I do not like the way she/he explains, I tend to...

251 responses

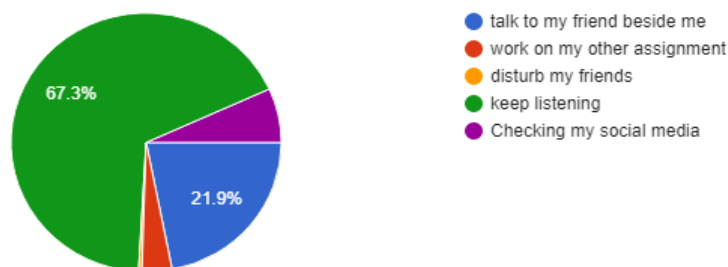


Figure 10. Respect

72% of the students across classes also mention that their classmates tend to talk by themselves in the middle of lecturing. Yet, they are active when it comes to Q and A sessions. 12% of students revealed that their classmate are very passive and quiet and another 11.2 % admitted that their friends are busy talking by themselves and very passive when it comes to discussion time.

19. My classmates tend to....when a teacher explains or asks questions.

251 responses

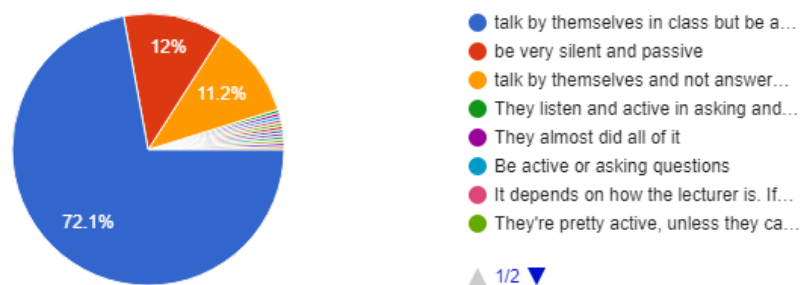


Figure 11. Respect

The questionnaire and the interview result with lecturers and students are interesting in the point that both agree that there is disrespect issue in class A. However, it is applied for all classes. It is only class A from year of 2017 and 2016. This finding is not conclusive yet. Further investigation related to this issue need to done.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

This study aimed to analyze the attitude and believes of the students and lecturers toward grouping ability in term of confidence, achievement, expectation, competition, cooperation and respect. The findings from questionnaires and interviews mostly showed positive attitudes and believes toward ability grouping both from the students and the lecturers being investigated. There is little issue about respect experienced by some lecturers, yet, it is inconclusive. Further investigation is still needed to study some issues.

There are some flaws in this study for example this study only investigates the attitudes and belief without comparing with the students' achievement to see whether grouping ability give negative or positive effect to the students. The next presenter can work on this issue. As for the English department, this grouping still can carry on, however some careful consideration such as on the issue of respect and the test that is being used to group the students. In addition, lecturers need to adjust

materials, select appropriate techniques and methods to suit the students' characteristics.

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