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Research Paper

## Male and Female EFL Learners' Perception of Free Riding Tendency

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### Abstract

Free riding behavior or not contributing equally in group work, is a common obstacle in many cooperative activities in language learning. The present study aimed at comparing male and female EFL learners' attitude and their free riding tendency to use the benefits of lowering free riding behaviors in order to make group work more influential in language learning. To this purpose, 140 intermediate and upper intermediate Iranian EFL learners and 30 teachers participated in the study. Semi-structured interviews and questionnaires were used to investigate the topic. The obtained results revealed that the female learners act better in reducing free riding behaviors. The results further revealed a positive perception of interpersonal activities at both level of language proficiency-- intermediate and upper-intermediate. Actually, the obtained results showed that the intermediate group (males and females) acted more positively than the other group in this respect. The findings of the study bear some implications and suggestions for scholar interested in the topic of this.

**Keywords:** *Attitude, EFL learners, Free Riding tendency, intermediate learners, upper intermediate learners*

### درک زبان آموزان خارجی زن و مرد از تمایل به گروه ناپذیری

رفتار گروه ناپذیری یا عدم مشارکت مساوی در کار گروهی، مانع مشترک بسیاری از فعالیت های گروهی در یادگیری زبان است. این مطالعه با هدف مقایسه نگرش زبان آموزان EFL زن و مرد و تمایل آنها به استفاده از مزایای کاهش رفتارهای گروه ناپذیری به منظور تأثیرگذاری بیشتر کار گروهی در یادگیری زبان انجام شده است. بدین منظور، 140 زبان آموز سطح متوسط و پیشرفته ایرانی و 30 معلم در این مطالعه شرکت کردند. برای بررسی این موضوع از مصاحبه ها و پرسشنامه های نیمه ساختار یافته استفاده شد. نتایج به دست آمده بیانگر این است که زبان آموزان زن در کاهش رفتارهای گروه ناپذیری بهتر عمل می کنند. نتایج بیشتر درک مثبتی از فعالیتهای بین فردی در هر دو سطح مهارت زبان - متوسط و پیشرفته- را نشان داد. در واقع، نتایج به دست آمده نشان داد گروه سطح متوسط (مرد و زن) از این نظر بهتر از گروه دیگر عمل می کنند. یافته های این تحقیق دارای برخی مفاهیم و پیشنهادات برای محققان علاقه مند به این موضوع است.

**واژگان کلیدی:** تمایل به گروه ناپذیری، زبان آموزان سطح متوسط، زبان آموزان سطح پیشرفته

## Introduction

People receive ideas and feelings from others, process them and send their own opinions and feelings back; therefore, they learn their mother tongue mostly by interacting with others in social environments. However, in learning a foreign language, there is a lack of opportunity to use the language in daily interaction, because it is not the main device of communication with the surrounding people. In recent decades, cooperative learning and teaching have been received plenty of attention from scholars, teachers, and researchers. According to Sato and McDono (2020) and Youn (2020), learners in groups help to pave the way to their group mates process of learning the second language. Actually, they work on a specific task, take a responsibility of doing a section to complete the task and achieve a specific goal (Singh and Agrawal, 2011). This method not only enhances learners' language achievements, but also creates a positive relationship among them to foster learning skills as well as social skills. Accordingly, the importance of pair/group work in L2 teaching/learning process in the classroom is undeniable.

Group work is a cooperative activity in which four students, perhaps with a topic, are doing a role-play or solving a problem. In groups, learners are more likely to participate equally, and they are also more able to experiment and use the language than they are in a whole-class arrangement (Rahaman, 2014). Group work provides the students with the opportunity to investigate the diversity of opinions, better hang on to the acquired information, and efficiently deal with projects too large to effectively handle individually (Gatfield, 1999). The theoretical foundation of group work is Vygotskian sociocultural theory that considers learning in a social process as interaction between students, one being the expert and the novice (Ortega, 2014). In fact, since learners have different strengths and weaknesses, they can change the role of expert and novice in completing a task. Besides Vygotsky, Freire (1970) admired "problem-posing education" in which learners ought to be free to interact and collaborate with their fellow group mates and teacher to build their reality and achieve a specific grade of critical thinking.

Language and attitudes towards it and its techniques/methods are inseparable. Attitudes are the feelings people have about something. Positive attitudes towards something enhance the process of learning or utilizing it while negative attitudes do the reverse (Crystal, 2011). Accordingly, teachers and students' attitudes towards use of group work in EFL classrooms play a key role in using this technique and consequently increasing the learners' language achievement as well as facilitating and enhancing teaching and learning process. Brown (2002) divided people into two groups: extroverts who enjoy working in groups and interacting with other people; in contrast, introverts who prefer working by themselves. It is teachers' responsibility to encourage learners -specifically introvert ones - to cooperate in group works and enlightens the importance of communicating with others for them: the more the learners get into interaction with other people, the more they enhance using a language properly in different social circumstances (Ababneh, 2017)

Based on what have been mentioned so far, it goes without saying that group work is a suitable technique in EFL classrooms to help learners in gaining more autonomy and responsibility towards their learning, being critical thinkers, enhancing social and verbal skills, and developing L2 knowledge. Moreover, learners' attitudes towards group work plays a critical role in learners' L2 progress and facilitates the teaching/learning process; therefore, it should be definitely considered properly in teaching process with a closer look on the male and female attitudes towards it. With this view in mind, the following research questions were addressed in the current study:

**RQ1:** Does EFL learners' gender makes any difference in group work free riding tendency?

**RQ2:** What are the perceptions of EFL male and female learners towards group work?

### Review of Literature

According to Akhtar et al. (2012), group work is one of the most important teaching strategies in EFL classrooms. It adds verity and fun to the teaching/learning process, motivates the learners and enhances their social and language skills. Learners believe, they add, that group work clears the concepts more than individual learning. It makes learning more interesting, and learners feel more responsibility of work.

Numerous studies have focused on the effect of group work on developing language skills. Rahaman (2014) has reported that group work has a significant impact on developing the ability of internalizing and comprehending the text in reading tasks, and consequently improve the Bangladeshis learners' reading skill. Pishghadam and Moghaddam (2011) have found that group work helps Iranian EFL learners in memorizing conversation and learning new vocabularies. In terms of writing, a study was conducted with international students in Australia (Li and Vandermensbrugge (2011).The obtained results indicated that group work writing helped the learners start their writing process, motivated them to enhance their writing skills, and has a significant positive effect on their self-confidence. Along the same vein, the results of a study by Erten and Altay (2009) showed that task-based activities and group work characterized by more negotiation of meaning, provide the learners with more real life-like interactions and thus have a significant impact on learners' speaking skill.

In addition to the positive impact of group work on improving different language skills, some diverse results were also reported by different researchers in terms of the effect of group work on language skills and learners' attitudes towards it. For example, Ababneh (2017) has shown that approximately two-thirds of Jordanian EFL learners had positive attitudes towards participating in group work and only a third didn't like to take part in group work in EFL classes. Similarly, in a study conducted by Alfares (2017), it was revealed that some Saudi learners faced difficulties in group work, mostly related to learners' behaviors that beget uncooperative work in groups. However, it was also found that many learners considered two advantages for group work: cognitive benefits that helped learners in the learning process, and emotional benefits that enhanced their motivation. In addition, based on the results of their study, Othman and Murad (2015) reported their Turkish learners' both positive and negative attitudes towards group work: "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 learners' 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 learners talk about external things and they cannot reach any agreement" and "learners depend on each other" were their negative opinions concerning group work (Othman and Murad, 2015). Besides, the results of a study done by Taqi and Al-Nouh (2014) on 40 Kuwaiti students of higher education regarding phonetics and phonology indicated that the learners who worked in groups did not improve their phonetics skill. Nonetheless, learners reported that they enjoyed the task and preferred to work in group more often than individually.

In Iran, using group work activities in learning process has recently become an essential part of EFL courses at all levels and in all contexts. It should be mentioned, however, that although several studies have been conducted to investigate teachers' and learners' attitudes towards group work as an efficient English learning strategy in the EFL classroom, the gender issue has been ignored or has received less attention. Thus, the importance of the current study lies in filling this gap; that is, gender perception of group work free riding tendency.

## Method

### Design and Context of the Study

In the present study, a mixed-methods design was used to find answers to the posed research questions in a more comprehensible way. This design establishes the development and use of one research part through the use of one method (qualitative or quantitative) to use the benefits of both methods.

### Participants

The participants of the study comprised 70 EFL intermediate and 70 upper-intermediate learners as well as 30 EFL teachers selected through random sampling from language schools of Urmia and Boukan, Iran. The EFL learners consisted of 57 female and 83 male students within the age range of 15 to 25. The teachers too consisted of 19 females and 11 males within the age range of 22 to 47. All the participants knew at least two languages, besides English, since the mother tongues of most participants in Urmia and Boukan were Azeri and Kurdish, respectively. It is to be mentioned that a formal classroom setting was the only medium of their English language learning and teaching, since they were learning English as a foreign language in their home country and thus, they rarely had any experience of learning English abroad.

### Instruments

#### Oxford Quick Placement Test

Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT) was used to homogenize the participants. It is a fast and reliable assessment to determine the learners' language proficiency level. It includes 60 questions that should be answered in 30 minutes. Questions are in multiple choice format and cover grammar, vocabulary as well as reading comprehension. The results of the learners' performance in this test revealed whether the participants selected for the purposes of the study were intermediate or upper-intermediate in terms of general language knowledge.

#### Attitudes Group Work Questionnaire

Feelings toward Group Work Questionnaire is an 18-item questionnaire developed by Cantwell and Andrews (Cantwell & Andrews, 2002). Each item of the questionnaire is rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree" with values 1-5 assigned to each alternative. There is no reverse scoring for this questionnaire. This questionnaire was used to predict how students' attitudes toward group work influence their learning and motivation. The reliability results of this questionnaire are presented in Table 1 below.

**Table 1**

*Group Work Questionnaire  
Reliability Results*

Attitude questionnaire	.940	18
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### Semi-structured Interview

Since one part of the study was qualitative, the needed data were collected through semi-structured interviews in order to obtain insights about both male and female learners' perception of free riding (see Appendix). The interview was conducted with 10 percent of the learner participants, individually in a quiet classroom. The interview included three questions adopted from Brown (2008) for the purposes of the current study. It lasted about 15 minutes for each participant, and their responses were recorded using a digital voice recorder. If they did not agree with the recording of their responses, the researcher took notes of the interviewees' responses in a

detailed format. The inter-rater reliability of the interview questions was computed using Cohen's Kappa test. The resulting Kappa of .97, reported in Table 2 below, shows that the rater provided similar information about the learners' interview questions.

**Table 2**

*Inter-rater Reliability Results for Learner Interview*

		Value	Asymp. Std. Error	Approx. T	Approx. Sig.
Learner Interview	Measure of Agreement N of Valid Cases	.978	0.54	11.163	.000

**Procedures**

**Data Collection Procedure**

First, to homogenize the participants in terms of language proficiency, Oxford Quick Placement Test was used and as a result, they were divided into intermediate and upper-intermediate learners studying in language schools. Then, to collect the data needed for analysis, in the last session of group work (the whole learning period took 6 weeks) when the last task of group work was completed, the learners were asked to complete the attitude questionnaire in order to get access to their beliefs and attitudes towards the concept of free riding. A semi-structured interview including three questions were also used with ten percent of the participants, which took about 15 minutes for each participant. The data elicited through these two instruments were finally analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively to address the posed research question.

**Data Analysis Procedure**

Since a mixed methods design was exploited in the present research, the collected data were analyzed separately; that is, the questionnaire responses were analyzed through Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests which verified the normal distribution at  $p > .05$ , and the results of semi-structured interviews were transcribed and their content was analyzed through content analysis regarding the attitude of the participants towards group work activities and then, the results were compared to find answer to the qualitative research question.

**Results**

To answer the first research question, descriptive statistics was carried out on the scores derived from EFL learners in both groups. The descriptive results are presented in Tables 3, 4, 5 and 6 below for intermediate and upper-intermediate learners respectively.

**Table 3**

*Descriptive Statistics for Free-Riding and Motivation: Intermediate Learners*

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Free-riding	41.3714	12.84825	70

**Table 4**

*Descriptive Statistics for Free-Riding and Motivation: Upper-Intermediate Learners*

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Free riding	44.6000	11.22032	70

**Table 5**  
*Descriptive Statistics for Attitude Questionnaire of Intermediate Learners*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
1. I enjoy working within a group.	1.00	9	12.9	12.9	12.9
	2.00	32	45.7	45.7	58.6
	3.00	20	28.6	28.6	87.1
	4.00	5	7.1	7.1	94.3
	5.00	4	5.7	5.7	100.0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	
2. I sometimes feel nervous when I have to give my ideas or communicate within a group.	1.00	5	7.1	7.1	7.1
	2.00	11	15.7	15.7	22.9
	3.00	16	22.9	22.9	45.7
	4.00	19	27.1	27.1	72.9
	5.00	19	27.1	27.1	100.0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	
3. I understand information better after explaining it to others in group.	1.00	2	2.9	2.9	2.9
	2.00	4	5.7	5.7	8.6
	3.00	16	22.9	22.9	31.4
	4.00	25	35.7	35.7	67.1
	5.00	23	32.9	32.9	100.0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	
4. I often find it difficult to understand what the group task is.	1.00	3	4.3	4.3	4.3
	2.00	8	11.4	11.4	15.7
	3.00	19	27.1	27.1	42.9
	4.00	23	32.9	32.9	75.7
	5.00	17	24.3	24.3	100.0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	
5. I like to work alone even when placed in a group.	1.00	17	24.3	24.3	24.3
	2.00	29	41.4	41.4	65.7
	3.00	16	22.9	22.9	88.6
	4.00	4	5.7	5.7	94.3
	5.00	4	5.7	5.7	100.0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	
6. I prefer to work within a group rather than work alone.	1.00	6	8.6	8.6	8.6
	2.00	15	21.4	21.4	30.0
	3.00	13	18.6	18.6	48.6
	4.00	16	22.9	22.9	71.4
	5.00	20	28.6	28.6	100.0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	
7. I often have a strong satisfaction feeling when I become totally involved in a group achievement.	1.00	2	2.9	2.9	2.9
	2.00	7	10.0	10.0	12.9
	3.00	22	31.4	31.4	44.3
	4.00	18	25.7	25.7	70.0
	5.00	21	30.0	30.0	100.0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	





8. It is important that other group members take responsibility for my learning as well.	1.00	2	2.9	2.9	2.9
	2.00	3	4.3	4.3	7.1
	3.00	9	12.9	12.9	20.0
	4.00	24	34.3	34.3	54.3
	5.00	32	45.7	45.7	100.0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	
9. I usually make a strong personal contribution to group work.	1.00	4	5.7	5.7	5.7
	2.00	9	12.9	12.9	18.6
	3.00	7	10.0	10.0	28.6
	4.00	29	41.4	41.4	70.0
	5.00	21	30.0	30.0	100.0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	
10. I am often afraid to ask for help within my group.	1.00	3	4.3	4.3	4.3
	2.00	4	5.7	5.7	10.0
	3.00	6	8.6	8.6	18.6
	4.00	34	48.6	48.6	67.1
	5.00	23	32.9	32.9	100.0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	
11. I like group work more when we can make up our own groups.	1.00	1	1.4	1.4	1.4
	2.00	6	8.6	8.6	10.0
	3.00	15	21.4	21.4	31.4
	4.00	20	28.6	28.6	60.0
	5.00	28	40.0	40.0	100.0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	
12. I do not like to study within a group.	1.00	15	21.4	21.4	21.4
	2.00	30	42.9	42.9	64.3
	3.00	12	17.1	17.1	81.4
	4.00	6	8.6	8.6	90.0
	5.00	7	10.0	10.0	100.0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	
13. I can usually understand other group members' ideas.	1.00	8	11.4	11.4	11.4
	2.00	12	17.1	17.1	28.6
	3.00	15	21.4	21.4	50.0
	4.00	17	24.3	24.3	74.3
	5.00	18	25.7	25.7	100.0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	
14. When groups are well-organized, I don't believe there is a more effective way of using class time.	1.00	12	17.1	17.1	17.1
	2.00	21	30.0	30.0	47.1
	3.00	13	18.6	18.6	65.7
	4.00	13	18.6	18.6	84.3
	5.00	11	15.7	15.7	100.0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	
15. It is best when each person helps each other within a group.	1.00	4	5.7	5.7	5.7
	2.00	6	8.6	8.6	14.3
	3.00	16	22.9	22.9	37.1
	4.00	15	21.4	21.4	58.6
	5.00	29	41.4	41.4	100.0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	

	Total	70	100.0	100.0	
16. I often think the work becomes too confusing when done in a group rather than individually.	1.00	17	24.3	24.3	24.3
	2.00	27	38.6	38.6	62.9
	3.00	12	17.1	17.1	80.0
	4.00	7	10.0	10.0	90.0
	5.00	7	10.0	10.0	100.0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	
17. I rarely feel relaxed within a group.	1.00	11	15.7	15.7	15.7
	2.00	20	28.6	28.6	44.3
	3.00	9	12.9	12.9	57.1
	4.00	15	21.4	21.4	78.6
	5.00	15	21.4	21.4	100.0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	
18. I sometimes feel let down by other group members.	1.00	9	12.9	12.9	12.9
	2.00	24	34.3	34.3	47.1
	3.00	15	21.4	21.4	68.6
	4.00	12	17.1	17.1	85.7
	5.00	10	14.3	14.3	100.0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	

**Table 6***Descriptive Statistics for Attitude Questionnaire of Upper-Intermediate Learners*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
1. I enjoy working within a group.	1.00	7	10.0	10.0	10.0
	2.00	22	31.4	31.4	41.4
	3.00	20	28.6	28.6	70.0
	4.00	12	17.1	17.1	87.1
	5.00	9	12.9	12.9	100.0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	
2. I sometimes feel nervous when I have to give my ideas or communicate within a group.	1.00	13	18.6	18.6	18.6
	2.00	27	38.6	38.6	57.1
	3.00	17	24.3	24.3	81.4
	4.00	8	11.4	11.4	92.9
	5.00	5	7.1	7.1	100.0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	
3. I understand information better after explaining it to others in group.	1.00	6	8.6	8.6	8.6
	2.00	13	18.6	18.6	27.1
	3.00	18	25.7	25.7	52.9
	4.00	15	21.4	21.4	74.3
	5.00	18	25.7	25.7	100.0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	
4. I often find it difficult to understand what the group task is.	1.00	6	8.6	8.6	8.6
	2.00	24	34.3	34.3	42.9
	3.00	22	31.4	31.4	74.3
	4.00	10	14.3	14.3	88.6



	5.00	8	11.4	11.4	100.0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	
5. I like to work alone even when placed in a group.	1.00	18	25.7	25.7	25.7
	2.00	31	44.3	44.3	70.0
	3.00	15	21.4	21.4	91.4
	4.00	4	5.7	5.7	97.1
	5.00	2	2.9	2.9	100.0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	
6. I prefer to work within a group rather than work alone.	1.00	5	7.1	7.1	7.1
	2.00	9	12.9	12.9	20.0
	3.00	8	11.4	11.4	31.4
	4.00	17	24.3	24.3	55.7
	5.00	31	44.3	44.3	100.0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	
7. I often have a strong satisfaction feeling when I become totally involved in a group achievement.	1.00	1	1.4	1.4	1.4
	2.00	1	1.4	1.4	2.9
	3.00	8	11.4	11.4	14.3
	4.00	26	37.1	37.1	51.4
	5.00	34	48.6	48.6	100.0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	
8. It is important that other group members take responsibility for my learning as well.	1.00	5	7.1	7.1	7.1
	2.00	5	7.1	7.1	14.3
	3.00	5	7.1	7.1	21.4
	4.00	18	25.7	25.7	47.1
	5.00	37	52.9	52.9	100.0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	
9. I usually make a strong personal contribution to group work.	1.00	10	14.3	14.3	14.3
	2.00	13	18.6	18.6	32.9
	3.00	7	10.0	10.0	42.9
	4.00	16	22.9	22.9	65.7
	5.00	24	34.3	34.3	100.0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	
10. I am often afraid to ask for help within my group.	1.00	4	5.7	5.7	5.7
	2.00	9	12.9	12.9	18.6
	3.00	6	8.6	8.6	27.1
	4.00	22	31.4	31.4	58.6
	5.00	29	41.4	41.4	100.0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	
11. I like group work more when we can make up our own groups.	1.00	3	4.3	4.3	4.3
	2.00	6	8.6	8.6	12.9
	3.00	10	14.3	14.3	27.1
	4.00	24	34.3	34.3	61.4
	5.00	27	38.6	38.6	100.0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	
12. I do not like to study within a group.	1.00	29	41.4	41.4	41.4
	2.00	30	42.9	42.9	84.3
	3.00	5	7.1	7.1	91.4

	4.00	4	5.7	5.7	97.1
	5.00	2	2.9	2.9	100.0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	
13. I can usually understand other group members' ideas.	1.00	6	8.6	8.6	8.6
	2.00	3	4.3	4.3	12.9
	3.00	10	14.3	14.3	27.1
	4.00	17	24.3	24.3	51.4
	5.00	34	48.6	48.6	100.0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	
14. When groups are well-organized, I don't believe there is a more effective way of using class time.	1.00	11	15.7	15.7	15.7
	2.00	11	15.7	15.7	31.4
	3.00	4	5.7	5.7	37.1
	4.00	22	31.4	31.4	68.6
	5.00	22	31.4	31.4	100.0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	
15. It is best when each person helps each other within a group.	1.00	3	4.3	4.3	4.3
	2.00	6	8.6	8.6	12.9
	3.00	11	15.7	15.7	28.6
	4.00	21	30.0	30.0	58.6
	5.00	29	41.4	41.4	100.0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	
16. I often think the work becomes too confusing when done in a group rather than individually.	1.00	17	24.3	24.3	24.3
	2.00	23	32.9	32.9	57.1
	3.00	7	10.0	10.0	67.1
	4.00	13	18.6	18.6	85.7
	5.00	10	14.3	14.3	100.0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	
17. I rarely feel relaxed within a group.	1.00	13	18.6	18.6	18.6
	2.00	20	28.6	28.6	47.1
	3.00	3	4.3	4.3	51.4
	4.00	17	24.3	24.3	75.7
	5.00	17	24.3	24.3	100.0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	
18. I sometimes feel let down by other group members.	1.00	13	18.6	18.6	18.6
	2.00	25	35.7	35.7	54.3

In general, the interview questions for the qualitative part of the study along with the descriptive results from the quantitative part of the study revealed that the intermediate participants had more positive attitudes toward group work activities comparing to upper intermediate once. They were more inclined to reduce free riding behavior since they believed that it could help them to overcome their stress and help them to have a better self-confidence in doing the activities in group rather than individually. The above results reveal, however, that although some of the male participants had a positive attitude towards group work, they were not trying to reduce free riding behavior. In other words, they would rather benefit other members instead of sharing their own attempts to reach better results. For example, one of the participants in the intermediate group believed that group work would provide you a situation to get benefits from your mates while you do nothing. Another participant described group work results as

encouragement for all the members, whether you share something or not, and so it can be the best opportunity to use mates' sharing. Another male participant in upper intermediate group mentioned that the homogeneity of the group members avoids you to trust your mates' feedback. another learner in the intermediate group stated that being a part of group is feeling safe among mates who follow the same goal as yours, and that they try to direct you to the right path just like a sport team. Another female learner in the same group described group work activity as a regular system that requires every member of the group to help and push each other to the direction which is not otherwise possible. Finally, a female member of the upper intermediate group commented that she could reflect on the content to improve her language skills through group activities. All in all, the results indicates that female participants have a significant distinction with the male participants that reveal that female participants tend to have very low free riding behaviors.

### **Discussion**

Almost all teachers recommend cooperative work in order to encourage group work which paves the way for solving problems and facilitating language learning. They acknowledge the value of peer feedback as a social interaction that is very important even for the primary level students, although it might cause problems such as free riding which makes some learners misuse the benefits of others' cooperation without making any attempts themselves. According to Kyaw (2020), cooperation is not just a classroom technic; it is a personal philosophy as well that highlights male and female contributions and abilities. It is, therefore, indispensable for instructors to provide ways to develop learners' interpersonal skills. This might, however, cause some obstacles. In fact, teachers usually acknowledge the value of social interaction which is of great importance even at primary levels of learning a language. But such a social interaction as cooperative activities might cause problems such as free riding, which makes some learners ill use the benefits of others' activities, or even cause some incorrect peer feedbacks that can be misleading. Yet, despite the disadvantages, group work activities are still worth doing.

The findings of the present research proves that the use of the first language as the medium of group work make the engagement and contribution of learners easier, especially for the learners in intermediate groups, which in turn leads to lesser free-riding. Regarding learners' attitudes to cooperative work, the findings reveal that, generally speaking, learners hold positive attitudes towards cooperative interaction through group work. Nevertheless, the learners who pointed to particular drawbacks of group work, should not be ignored. Finally, a closer look at the finding indicates that female learners in both groups had a more positive view towards group work activities, which is an important factor to reduce free riding behaviors.

One final point that needs further discussion is the reason behind female participants' more positive view towards group work activities in language learning, while it is not the same with them in other fields such as sports, football for example--a manifest case of successful group work with the lowest level of free riding among both males and females.

### **Conclusions**

Based on the results of this study, teachers are recommended to find solutions to the problems arising from free riding tendency. This can be done through engaging learners in interpersonal interaction and enhancing social skills, which in turn, according to Weinberger and Shonfeld (2020), helps EFL learners to accept others' opinion and makes them more responsible individuals.

As a final word, it is to be stated here that the current research was conducted in the face of a limitation, since it only dealt with one topic; that is, gender and free riding tendency. Thus, more research is necessary in terms of the learners' differences such as learning style, age range

and other factors that are effective in decreasing or increasing the level of free riding behavior, as well as the factors that have a positive impact on the development of group work skills.

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## **Appendix**

### **Interview Questions for Learner Participants**

1. Do you find the opportunity to do group work tasks effective or you find it challenging?
2. Do you think you gain more benefits from experiences of collaborative works? In what ways?
3. Do you feel that you work more actively in groups, comparing with the times you work on the same topics individually?