

The Effect of Collaborative Learning on Iranian Intermediate EFL Learners' Oral Skills and Motivation

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Abstract-In recent years English as a foreign/ second literature has been widely researched and advocated the concept of collaborative learning, the grouping and pairing of students for the purpose of achieving an academic. Collaborative learning strategies have occupied a prominent place among language learning strategies. As such, this study aimed at investigating the effect of collaborative learning on oral skill performance and motivation of Iranian EFL Learners. The participants were 72 adult students out of whom 50 were selected based on their performance on a general English placement test (Interchange Objective Placement Test) at the intermediate level in Shahreza Nahid Foruzan Art and Cultural Institute. A pretest-posttest control group design was used. The participants were divided into two groups; the experimental group was taught in collaborative learning for one semester using the techniques such as Learning Together and Pair Talk; the control group was taught in the conventional method. The data included: 1) the results of the two oral tasks, and 2) the results of the motivational questionnaire. The independent samples *t*-test and paired samples *t*-test were used to determine whether there were significant inter and intra-group differences. The results provided evidence that collaborative learning helps to enhance significantly the adult EFL learners' oral skill performance and their motivation toward learning English.

Keywords: Collaborative Learning, Communicative Competence, Traditional Teaching, Motivation

Introduction

The term collaborative learning refers to an instructional method in which students at various performance levels work together in small groups toward a common goal (Bruner, 1985). According to Johnson and Johnson (1994), there is persuasive evidence that collaborative teams achieve at higher levels of thought and retain information longer than students who work individually. The shared learning gives students an opportunity to engage in discussion, take responsibility for their own learning, and thus become critical thinkers. The act of working in small groups in collaborative learning helps weak students to think aloud, take risks, and develop deeper understandings and higher order thinking. Also, language learners become more self-confident as they develop their oral language skills and improve their relationships with other students as well as with their teachers. According to Johnson and Johnson (1986, p. 164) collaborative learning has the following five elements, i.e. (1) positive interdependence, (2) individual accountability, (3) quality group processing, (4) explicit teaching of small group skills, and (5) teaching of social skills. Based on Kagan (1995), investigation reveals that collaborative learning has a dramatic positive

impact on almost all of the factors critical to language acquisition.

There are a number of ways of structuring positive interdependence which is one of the elements of collaborative learning. One way is to have a single group product; another is to assign roles for each student; providing a group reward also fosters positive interdependence. According to Cohen (1994), without positive interdependence, students sometimes fall into the trap of 'hitchhiking', where they allow one student to do all the work for them.

Furthermore it is very important for students to have sufficient social skills, involving an explicit teaching of appropriate leadership, communication, trust and conflict resolution skills so that they can collaborate effectively. Schultz (1999) has stated that social skills should be explicitly taught to the students so that students can work among themselves, not only in terms of collaboration but also without hostility and without the teacher's authority. MacIntyre et al. (2001) state that Motivation represents one of the most appealing, yet complex, variables used to explain individual differences in language learning. They maintain that motivation and attitudes play key roles for learners to study and acquire second language. Cohen and Dörnyei (2006, p.172, cited in Griffiths, 2003)

argue that "motivation is often seen as the key learner variable because without it nothing much happens. Indeed, most other learner variables presuppose the existence of at least some degree of motivation."

Troike (2006) add to the topic that the factor motivation also includes the attitudes that the learners have towards the new language. Djigunović (2008) also mentions that motivation is often connected with levels of aspiration, which is defined as the standard that individuals set themselves in target-directed activities. The following questions were addressed in the current study:

1. Does collaborative learning have any significant effect on oral performance of Iranian intermediate EFL learners?
2. Does collaborative learning have any effect on the promotion of Iranian EFL intermediate learners' motivation?

Methodology

Participants

The participants were 50 male intermediate EFL students studying English at Nahid Art and Cultural English institute chosen non-randomly by administering a general English placement test (Interchange Placement Test– Interchange Placement and Evaluation Package, Third Edition-Cambridge University Press 2005- hereafter called IOPT) to over 120 EFL students in order to make sure that the participants were homogeneous with regard to their language proficiency. They had received instructions on English language for about 2 years in that institute before taking part in this study. They were studying Interchange series (3rd edition). All of the participants were native speakers of Persian, and they used English as a foreign language for general purposes. Their age ranged between 20 and 30.

Based on the IOPT test scoring level chart, those whose scores in the test were between 37 and 49 (i.e. rating 7-8) were considered as the intermediate-level participants of this study.

Instruments

Different materials were employed in this study to carry on the intended research. In the following subsections, they are described in detail.

The IOPT (Interchange Objective Placement Test)

In order to identify the general English knowledge of the participants, (IOPT) was applied. The test is composed of 3 multiple-choice question sections including the listening section (20 questions), the reading section (20 questions) and the language use section (30 questions). All of the items were multiple-choice questions.

Oral Tasks

Two oral tasks were used in this study as pretest and posttest. The tasks involving paired dialogues were designed to test the participants' oral communicative competence regarding the linguistic features.

The first task was administered at the beginning of the semester as the pretest and the second one toward the end of the semester as the posttest. A scoring rubric, adapted from Wei (1990) was used along with the scoring sheet for the purpose of grading. The grading of the linguistic competence of oral tasks was based upon five criteria: (1) appropriateness (20%), (2) adequacy of vocabulary for purpose (20%), (3) grammatical accuracy (20%), (4) intelligibility (20%), and (5) fluency (20%).

The second oral task that the students performed as the posttest was asking about their partners' *favorite football team*. The system of rating was the same as that of the pretest.

Motivational Questionnaire

In order to understand about the students' motivation toward learning English after this study, Motivational Questionnaire (MQ) containing 41 items outlined by Celce-Murcia, Brinton, and Goodwin (1996) was used. The questionnaire was a likert-type scale coded on a 5-point scale.

Procedures

This study is a quasi-experimental one. The participants were non-randomly selected and assigned into two groups. Thus, to ensure that all the participants were at the same level of proficiency, Interchange Objective Placement Test (IOPT) was administered to the two intermediate classes in the above mentioned institute. Then, based on the mean score and standard deviation, a sample of 50 out of 72 participants was selected and randomly assigned into two groups. The placement test showed the reliability of 0.79 through the split-half method.

In order to find out if collaborative learning has significant effect on increasing motivation, the motivation questionnaire was administered twice on the participants in the experimental group, (once before the treatment and the other after).

In addition, the participants' performances on the oral tasks were transcribed by three raters based on the scoring rubric and actual scoring sheets of oral task for the later analysis. The teaching materials and activities in the control group were based on the traditional techniques, which involved mainly the Grammar-Translation and some of the Audio-lingual techniques. In addition the traditional teaching method in this study also included isolated learning context, as opposed to that of the collaborative leaning in the experimental group.

The design of collaborative learning in the experimental group was integrated within the students' regular English

curriculum. The teaching materials that the students studied were mainly the *New Interchange book* series, the first half of the Book III, for both groups. The teaching materials and activities in the control group were based on the traditional techniques, which involved mainly the Grammar-Translation and some of the Audio-lingual techniques. The integration of these two methods, according to Yu (2003), was the most popular teaching method used in EFL classes. In addition to the use of Grammar Translation with Audio-lingual method, the traditional teaching method in this study also included isolated learning context, as opposed to that of the collaborative learning in the experimental group.

There were three major sections in teaching the control group, including (1) vocabulary, (2) dialogue, and (3) sentence structure.

In the experimental group, the role of the teacher during implementing collaborative learning was to turn the traditional classroom into a collaborative learning context. Furthermore techniques such as Learning Together which was well organized and controlled so that each of the group members had the chance to talk and to explore the collaborative skills, and Talk-Pair (as a part of oral task) in which students discuss their response with a student sitting

close by, and then share with the entire class were also used. A time limit of one or two minutes should be used for the pair exchange. This is a good technique for breaking up a presentation, as well as an assessment of student understanding.

Data Analysis

After the collection of all the data for description and analysis of the information, the SPSS software version 16 was used and the principles of descriptive statistics were applied in order to identify and describe the data. The measures of mean and standard deviation were calculated. Inferential statistics were applied to test the proposed hypotheses. The means of the two groups were compared by the application of a paired sample t-test.

According to the statistics depicted in Table 1 it can be seen that the mean difference of pre and posttests for control group is 1.16, the mean for pre-test was 60.60 and for experimental group was 61.76. Being compared by an independent t test, it was found that the $P > .05$ which does not show any significant difference between the mean of the two groups.

Table 1. The results of the mean comparison between the oral scores of pre and post-tests of control group

| | Mean | N | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean |
|-----------------|---------|----|----------------|-----------------|
| Pair 1 VAR00001 | 60.6000 | 25 | 11.78276 | 2.35655 |
| VAR00002 | 61.7600 | 25 | 11.76959 | 2.35392 |

On the other hand as table 2 shows the mean score difference for experimental group is 11.16 (the mean score for pre-test being 61.40 and that for post-test being 72.56)

that is a difference of 11.16 which is considered to be significant. So the first hypothesis can be rejected.

Table 2. The results of experimental group pre and post oral tests scores mean comparison

| | Mean | N | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean |
|-----------------|---------|----|----------------|-----------------|
| Pair 1 VAR00001 | 61.4000 | 25 | 11.04913 | 2.20983 |
| VAR00002 | 72.5600 | 25 | 12.06607 | 2.41321 |

To test this hypothesis a t-test was run between the mean of the scores gained from the motivation questionnaire which were run before and after the

treatment. The descriptive statistics of the two set of scores is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Paired Samples Statistics between experimental group motivation questionnaire scores

| | Mean | N | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean |
|-----------------|----------|----|----------------|-----------------|
| Pair 1 VAR00001 | 1.4898 | 49 | .50508 | .07215 |
| VAR00002 | 1.4143E2 | 49 | 18.20371 | 2.60053 |

Table 4. Paired sample t- test between the motivation questionnaire scores of experimental group

| | | Paired Differences | | | | | T | df | Sig. (2-tailed) |
|--------|----------------------|--------------------|-------------------|--------------------|--|------------|---------|----|-----------------|
| | | Mean | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | | | | |
| | | | | | Lower | Upper | | | |
| Pair 1 | VAR00001 VAR00002 | -1.39939E2 | 18.00973 | 2.57282 | -145.11177 | -134.76578 | -54.391 | 48 | .000 |

As the statistical analysis in table 4 showed the experimental group outperformed the control group in

terms of motivation and the t-observed was higher than the t-critical; therefore the second null hypothesis is rejected.

Discussion

This study tried to examine the effects of collaborative learning on the improvement of the EFL learners' language learning in terms of oral performance and provide a close link between collaborative learning and the communicative language teaching. Moreover, it aimed at investigating the effect of collaborative learning on Iranian EFL adult learners' motivation toward learning English as a foreign language.

The findings of the study revealed that first; there is a high correlation between the collaborative learning and oral skill of language learners. Second, the same high positive relation also exists between the collaborative learning and motivation of language learners. Based on the results obtained through the statistical analysis on the collected data, it can be safely claimed that there is a significant difference between the oral performance of those students who are taught through collaborative learning and the others. Moreover, the significant improvement of the participants' language proficiency possibly resulted from the fact that discussing, creating, and thinking in a group, rather than individually, can provide a less anxiety-producing context.

The results obtained in this study are inline with the previous studies done in the field and contribute to the

existing literature regarding the Effect of collaborative learning on EFL learners' oral skills and motivation which can be supported by many previous research results showing that collaborative learning can contribute to the improvement of students' language proficiency (Somapee, 2002; Seetapee, 2003; Nakahashi, 2007).

Implications of the Study

This study dealt with exploring the influence of collaborative learning on EFL learners' motivation to learn and its impact on oral ability of Iranian learners. In order for the findings of this study to be pedagogically valid and applicable, they must be first subjected to replication and empirical validation.

Furthermore the findings of this study can be useful for EFL methodologists, textbook authors, syllabus designers, curriculum developers, language teachers, and language test makers. Of course this study was conducted on only fifty participants, smaller or larger number might change the results of the study. This study only took into consideration the participants at the intermediate level which was one of the limitations of the study. Last but not least, shorter on longer time of the research would possibly affect the findings of the study.

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Vitae

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