Effect of Elementary EFL Learners' Negotiation on Their Classroom Participation and Grammatical Achievement

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Abstract—**The principal concern of the present study was to explore the effects of two types of negotiation (group work and pair work) on the degree of elementary EFL students' participation and its corollary impact on their grammatical achievement. Both classes in the study received grammar instruction for twenty sessions. The learners took two grammar tests before and after the treatment in the multiple-choice format. The results showed that negotiation in pairs leads to less participation but better grammatical achievement. In other words, while students in the group work negotiated more, their grammatical achievement was significantly less than the students in the pair work who participated less. It could be concluded, therefore, that while group work leads to more participation, higher grammatical knowledge is possible to be obtained by less participative students.**

Index Terms—**pair work, group work, participation, negotiation, grammatical achievement**

I. INTRODUCTION

In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), participation or engagement of the students is a key factor in their learning process. Emphasizing participation is similar to what Nunan (1999) says about language that it is a system for expressing meaning. In this system, classroom participation and learning are closely associated and evaluation is done based on the amount and quality of student talk (Warayet, 2011). In the last few decades more attention has been paid to the social and interpersonal aspects of language learning. Social issues are no less important than cognitive issues in language acquisition. One of the issues which has attracted a lot of attention in second and foreign language research is negotiation. The first and foremost goal of language learning is communication and negotiation in the classroom is a means of developing communication skills. Moreover, since humans use language in different contexts to convey messages, language theories with a communicative bend put strong emphasis on interaction, "to get one idea out of your head and into the head of another person and vice versa" (Brown, 1994, p. 159). On the other hand, any interaction entails a form of participation which happens inside the classroom and it is believed that participation and learning are intertwined. The relationship between participation and learning and the definitions of learning and participation have been subjects of extensive and ongoing discussions (e.g., Block 2003; Firth & Wagner 1997, 1998, 2007; Gass 1998; Lantolf 2000; Long 1997; Mondada & Pekarek-Doehler 2004; Sfard 1998).

A very commonly observed scenario by many language instructors in EFL classrooms is the students' reticent behavior. Students' silence or reluctance to participate or speak using the target language has always been seen as the main source of students' failure and teachers' frustration (Flowerdew & Miller, 1995; Jackson, 2002; Zhang & Head, 2009). Lack of negotiation and participation together constitute a major obstacle for students to develop oral proficiency in the English language as compared to the development of reading and listening skills (Jenkins, 2008). This passive attitude disrupts instructional plans and makes it hard for instructors to facilitate active learning among students. Moreover, most of the time, instructors have to find ways to break the uncomfortable silence in interaction in order to minimize the feeling of discomfort. As this problem has become one of the key issues and a challenge in the field of English language teaching, many Asian EFL instructors have always tried to seek an answer to it. However, the explanations given are usually simple and lay the blame with students by relying on stereotypical characteristics of passivity and uncooperativeness (Harumi, 2001). Thus, there is a pressing need to examine this phenomenon to have a better understanding of it. Students' participation should not be thought of in terms of physical presence only; they should be mentally present in the classroom as well. Mental presence manifests itself in students' interest in classroom material, listening to teacher, and answering questions. However, in spite of such beliefs and encouragement from teachers' side, still many students remain passive in the classroom.

Classroom participation has been studied from psychological and sociolinguistic perspectives. Such studies have found that two sets of factors may affect classroom participation. These factors include social and organizational factors.

Examples of the former are age, gender and students and teachers' culture (Fassinger, 1995). Examples of the latter are class size and curriculum design (Howard et al., 1996). Individual differences were also important because whether a student elects to participate orally or remains silent differs from one student to the next (Meyer, 2007).

In Iran, EFL classroom teachers are not native speakers of English. These teachers do not have access or exposure to native contexts. This is the first problem. Second, these teachers are considered as authority by their students which can have effects on their behavior and attitudes. Moreover, the educational system is teacher-centered by far and the students are mostly passive in the classroom. Due to the importance of participation and the role it plays in learning, and because of the relatively passive role that Iranian students play in learning English, this study attempted to investigate which method of teaching would increase classroom participation and what would be the increased participation's effect on the students' learning of grammar.

This study was designed to investigate the effect of classroom negotiation on the EFL learners' participation and grammatical achievement. The research questions were:

RQ₁: Is there a significant difference in the amount of students' participation between the two levels of negotiation, that is, pair work and group work?

RQ₂: Is there a significant difference in the amount of students' grammatical achievement between the two levels of participation, that is, low and high participation?

The stated research questions led to the formulation of the following null research hypotheses:

RH₁: There is no significant difference in the amount of students' participation between the two levels of negotiation, that is, pair work and group work.

RH₂: There is no significant difference in the amount of students' grammatical achievement between the two levels of participation, that is, low and high participation.

II. REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

Many studies have tried to provide an acceptable definition for classroom participation. Vandrick (2000) argues that most of teachers have a limited idea of participation. According to him, real participation requires students to join in the discussions, answer the questions, and make comments. Fritschner (2000) defines participation in terms of 'talkers' and 'non-talkers.' Talkers participate through doing different things. They are attentive, listen actively, sit patiently, do homework, and are prepared (2000). Others like Heyman and Sailors (2011) have a different definition of classroom participation. They see participation as an active learning where students are publicly engaged in the course material. However, Dancer and Kamvounias (2005) believe that participation should be made part of assessment requirements to encourage students to develop their oral communication skills. Dallimore et al. (2010) are of the belief that participation, in addition, should demonstrate other skills such as interacting and cooperating with peers and the tutor. They consider these features as essential for participation to lead to better performance and improved retention of course content.

The general pattern of classroom participation seems to be verbal. Oral involvement is the main indicator of students' participation. In fact, there is no agreement upon which type of classroom participation is the most important. Dallimore et al. (2004), for example, indicated that student participation means more than speaking as it includes a variety of non-oral features. The same idea is resounded by Fritschner (2000). This means that classroom participation should involve not only oral engagement but also meaningful non-oral acts related to the ongoing activity. Therefore, it is clear that students should engage in classroom discussions through both oral and non-oral participation.

Negotiation has other definitions like that of a discussion which tries to reach an agreement (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, 1993). In second language research, it means communication between learners of a second language. In SLA research negotiation, in particular, is the process through which speakers make an effort to understand one another (Long, 1985, 1996; Lyster & Ranta, 1997), produce correct linguistic structures and/or relevant information regarding a particular topic (Rulon & McCreary, 1986; Van den Branden, 1997).

It has been known for a long time that negotiated interaction between teachers and students in L2 classrooms has a facilitating effect. Negotiation allows SL learners to produce language meaningfully, to access to meaningful language, and to improve through comprehensibility (e.g., Long, 1985, 1987, 1996; Swain, 1995, 1998).

Three types of content, meaning, and form negotiation are referred to in the literature (e.g., Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Van den Branden, 1997). Van Lier (1988) makes a distinction between conversational and didactic repair. Drawing on this distinction, Lyster and Ranta (1997) attribute a conversational function and a didactic function to conversational repair. The focus of conversational function is on negotiation of meaning while the didactic function is concerned with form.

The purpose of negotiation of meaning is to reach at mutual understanding through resolving communication problems (Gass, 1997). Unlike negotiation of meaning, which is triggered by an indication of non-understanding, negotiation of form is prompted by inappropriate or inaccurate use of forms. In form negotiation one participant pushes the other participant to produce a well formed utterance (Van den Branden, 1997). In negotiation of content, as defined by many researchers (e.g., Rulon & McCreary, 1986), the participants aim at keeping the conversation flow not at grammatical accuracy. For example, hearing "He didn't attended the party yesterday", an interlocutor may only ask "why?" to elicit another response.

Research has testified to the positive effect of cooperation (Johnson & Johnson, 1991). Purportedly, participants who are involved in cooperative learning learn better than those who are involved a competitive learning activity (Slavin, 1995). Findings have also revealed that cooperative learning has a positive effect on the students' relationship, confidence, long-term storage of information, and deep understanding of materials (Kagan, 1999). Cooperation is claimed to be one of the most constructive learning strategies.

Willing (1987) reports that 'pair work and language games' are among the least-liked activities among the ESL learners he surveyed in Australia. Nunan (1989) claims that learners often favor 'traditional' activities to 'communicative' showing a preference for teacher-centered style of teaching. Group and pair work have also been challenged on the grounds that they do not ensure satisfactory outcomes. Wells (1999) sees the problem in the ephemeral nature of spoken discourse which makes it difficult for participants to be sure that progress has been made. Students also have difficulty in understanding the nature of this progress.

Ellis (1994) argued that students reveal more interest to communicate if they are given more opportunities to speak. It has been observed that Asian students are reluctant to express their ideas and want others to speak for them (Richards & Renandya, 2002). Harmer (1991) claims that group and pair work are strategies to resolve this problem because they allow students to work in a favorable and enabling environment. Group work, according to Gower (1987) has a number of advantages as it encourages learners' to experience various types of interaction and helps generate a more relaxed and cooperative classroom atmosphere.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a quasi-experimental design since the participants took part in the experimental groups without being randomly selected. The study had two levels. During the first phase, it applied negotiation of form, what Ellis (2004) calls consciousness-raising task, at the two levels of pair work and group work as the treatment. A total of twenty lessons were presented during the 20 sessions of the study to each group and the teacher asked questions about the target structures to trigger negotiation. The students' hand raising attempts to answer the target questions were counted, recorded, and then aggregated for each session. Therefore, negotiation type was the independent variable and the students' hand-raising or participation the dependent variable. In other words, the total of hand-raising attempts for each student, or their participation during the course, constituted the values of the dependent variable. Participation itself, however, was the nested independent variable whose effect was measured to see if it affected the participants' grammatical achievement. Therefore, in the second phase of the study, participation at the two levels of low participation and high participation, was the independent variable with grammatical achievement as the dependent variable.

Participants

The participants of this study were second-grade high school students attending two English classes during the academic year 2016. The high school is located in Ardabil, Iran. There was an average of 20 students in each class. All of the students were almost of the same age, i.e., 14. They sat two English classes each week. Both groups were approximately equal in number.

Instruments

a) Textbook

The textbook used in this study was the *Prospect* textbook taught in Iranian high schools. The grammar points to be worked on were chosen from this textbook.

b) Participation checklist

The participation checklist was designed for registering the hand-raising attempts of the participants for answering questions addressing the target structures. At the end, these values were aggregated and used as the participants' participation profiles. These profiles or sets of scores, each belonging to one of the groups, were used in the data analysis stage.

c) Grammar pretest and posttest

The textbook used in the study was the source of all grammatical structures taught. The pretest and posttest both were in the multiple-choice format and exactly the same. Since twenty structures were investigated, the test contained twenty questions each addressing one of the structures such as simple present tense. The reliability of the tests was estimated through running a Cronbach Alpha test which equaled .079. This value is within the acceptable range.

Procedure

The procedure for conducting this research included the following steps:

a) Participant selection

The two participating classes were chosen randomly from among second-grade high school classes in Ardabil, Iran. Each class contained 20 learners.

b) Grouping

There were two intact classes each with 20 students. Thus, one of the classes was randomly named as the first experimental group. In this, the students negotiated in pairs. The other class was considered to be the second experimental group. The students in this class negotiated in groups.

c) Treatment

The treatments lasted for ten weeks, with two class meetings each week. A total of twenty lessons were presented during the 20 sessions and the teacher asked questions about the target structures to trigger negotiation. The students' hand raising attempts to answer the target questions were recorded and aggregated for each session.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

At each phase of the study with one independent variable having two levels and a continuous dependent variable, it was necessary to run an independent-samples T-test. But, as one of its assumptions, the distribution of scores in this test should be normal. To make sure that the data gathered were normal, a Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test was run on the data at each level. But the distribution of scores in neither of the conditions was normal. Therefore, the non-parametric alternative of the Independent-samples T-test, that is, Mann-Whitney U test was used to test the research hypotheses.

Testing the First Null Hypothesis

The first research hypothesis stated that, there is no significant difference in the amount of students' participation between the two levels of negotiation, that is, pair work and group work. Since the distribution of scores was not normal, a Mann-Whitney U test was used. The independent variable was negotiation with the two levels of pair work and group work and the dependent variable was the students' degree of participation. Table 1 shows the result of this test. The finding shows that the degree of participation differed significantly between the pair work and group work conditions. This finding convinces us to reject our first null hypothesis. However to know which group outperformed the other, we have to look at the Ranks Table (Table 2) that follows Table 1.

TABLE 1.
MANN-WHITNEY U TEST RESULT FOR DEGREE OF PARTICIPATION

	degree of participation
Mann-Whitney U	.000
Wilcoxon W	210.000
Z	-5.414
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
Exact Sig. [2*(1-tailed Sig.)]	.000[b]

a. Grouping Variable: class type
b. Not corrected for ties.

TABLE 2.
THE MEAN AND TOTAL PARTICIPATION ATTEMPTS IN THE TWO GROUPS

	Negotiation	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
degree of participation	Pair work	20	10.50	210.00
	Group work	20	30.50	610.00
	Total	40		

In the Ranks able (Table 2), we can see that the mean participation attempt in the pair work condition is 10.50 but in the group work condition it is 30.50. The total hand-raising or participation attempts are given in the column under Sum of Ranks. From the findings we can conclude that participation in the group work condition has been much more than participation in the pair work condition.

Testing the second null hypothesis

The second null hypothesis postulated that there is no significant difference in the amount of students' grammatical achievement between the two levels of participation, that is, low and high participation.

Since our comparison of the pair work and group work conditions revealed that the amount of participation in the group work was almost three times more than the amount of participation in the pair work and since only a couple of student in the pair work had participated more than a few students in the group work, the pair work and group work participation results were taken as equal to the low participation and high participation groups. This means that, the normality assumption of parametric tests was not met to run an independent-samples T-test, like in testing of the first hypothesis; therefore the same procedure, i.e., running Mann-Whitney U test, was applied to this hypothesis as well. The test result indicated that changes in the degree of participation as a result of negotiation type has affected the participants' gains in terms of grammatical knowledge with $Sig<.0001$ at $P=.95$. Since the difference is significant, the second null hypothesis is also rejected. However, the direction of change is not clear yet. That is, it is not clear whether more participation or less participation has resulted in better performance in the grammar test.

TABLE 3.
MANN-WHITNEY U TEST RESULTS FOR GRAMMATICAL ACHIEVEMENT

	Grammatical Achievement
Mann-Whitney U	43.500
Wilcoxon W	253.500
Z	-4.346
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
Exact Sig. [2*(1-tailed Sig.)]	.000[b]

a. Grouping Variable: class type
b. Not corrected for ties.

As in the first hypothesis, to know about the direction of influence, we have to look at the Ranks Table. This table can help us to find out which group gained more in terms of grammatical knowledge. We also would like to know if the degree of participation resulting from negotiation type has been influential in this improvement. Table 4 answers these two questions.

TABLE 4.
THE MEAN AND TOTAL GRAMMATICAL ACHIEVEMENT SCORES IN THE TWO GROUPS

	Participation	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Grammatical achievement	Low participation	20	28.33	566.50
	High participation	20	12.68	253.50
	Total	40		

As it is evident in Table 4, direction of the difference has been to the advantage of the low participation condition or pair work class. In this class the students obtained a mean rank score more than twice as big as the mean score of the high participation condition or group work class. This means that more participation did not result in higher grammatical scores in the posttest and students in the low participation condition or pair work class obtained significantly higher scores in the grammar test.

The hand-raising attempts or participation in the group work negotiation were much more than hand-raising attempts in the pair work negotiation. This finding rejected the first null hypothesis. There are some contradictory opinions relating to the usefulness of group work. Tiberius (1995) counts a number of reasons why group work might not work. The two most important reasons he expresses are that, some teachers may experience difficulty with handling group work and the feelling that this detracts their status and therefore be disinterested in this method of teaching. Weaver and Hybles (2004), also, believe that group discussions could bore some students and appear as a waste of time.

However, there is a great body of research which supports the use of group work. There has been a great deal of research regarding the issue of interaction in language acquisition (e.g., Gass, 1997; Long, 1996). Ellis (1994), also, believes that students' motivation increases when they have more opportunities to speak as when they are put in groups. In some cultures, as in Asian cultures, students are very anxious about making mistakes in front of others (Weaver & Hybles, 2004). Even though there are shortcomings, it seems inevitable to implement group work in the classroom.

The benefit of group work is twofold. First, it improves language learning, and second it releases stress due to the student-centered atmosphere that it creates. As Gower (1987) has pointed out, group work has the potential to improve different kinds of interaction among learners and can produce a less stressful as well as more cooperative classroom mood.

Regarding the second null hypothesis, the results revealed that there was a difference to the advantage of the pair-work class which obtained a mean score more than twice as big as the mean score of the group work class. It was found that pair work affected the grammatical achievement of the participants more than group work. The reasons for this may vary, but it seems to be possible that 'peer talk' and 'peer correction' lead to better performance in producing correct grammatical outcomes. It may be discussed that the pair work assignments are dealt with in more depth than the assignments in group work.

The positive contributions of the pair work in building positive inter-personal relationships have always been confirmed in research (Chiba, 2010; Mackey, Oliver, & Leeman, 2003; Varonis & Gass, 1985). This negotiation type has the property of providing a variety of opportunities for L2 learners to interact with each other using communicative language tasks that will promote the acquisition of language (Finocchiaro & Brumfit, 1983).

V. CONCLUSION

Despite being important parts of collaborative teaching and learning, group work and pair work are generally neglected in public and private institutions of Iran. In Iran, school teachers employ lecturing more than any other method for teaching English. The classes are also overpopulated and there is little interaction between students and the teachers. In fact, here the teacher acts like an authoritarian knower not a facilitator. Ellis (1994) noted that generally students learn successfully in natural settings. Group work and pair work activities are very similar to natural settings. Group activities have the advantage of improving thinking and solidifying information more than traditional approaches. Interaction or negotiation can also foster active learning.

Working together is valuable in education because it increases the amount of students talking time (Harmer, 1991). Students who take the initiative in learning, according to Hedge (2000), learn more things and learn better than passive students waiting for the teacher to teach. Working in groups and pairs is also fun for students and acts as a source of intrinsic motivation for them. In group and pair work students communicate with each other, share suggestions, insights, and feedback about successful or unsuccessful attempts of each other. Researchers also claim that teacher-dominated atmosphere kills students' interests (Kundo & Tutto, 1989). Accordingly, the teaching methodology of English in Iranian high schools needs to be revised. From the outcome of this study, it can be claimed that group work and pair work have a potentially positive impact on the learning of EFL learners, but participation is not a good predictor of grammatical achievement.

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