

The Effects of Using Instructional Conversation Method on Oral Autonomy of Iranian Intermediate EFL Learners

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Abstract—This study was conducted with the aim of investigating the impact of instructional conversations on oral autonomy of Iranian English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners. Forty-nine Iranian intermediate EFL learners from three language institutes in Sarakhs were selected as the participants of the study based on their scores in Nelson Proficiency Test. Administering Nelson General Proficiency Test, participants were measured to make sure they are homogeneous. These participants were randomly assigned into to control and experimental groups. Participants in both groups sat for Learner Oral Autonomy Questionnaire with some modifications from Kashefian's learner autonomy questionnaire (2002). Results of independent samples t-test lack of any significant difference between the two groups in oral autonomy at the outset of the study. Throughout the study which lasted for 12 sessions participants in experimental group received the treatment, instructional conversations, as a tool for teaching speaking materials. Participants in the control group were taught the same materials as those practiced in the former group through such techniques as role playing, peer dialogues, and oral presentations. Finally, the posttest being the same as the pretest was administered. Results of independent samples t-test showed that the experimental group significantly outperformed the control one in Oral Autonomy Questionnaire. The present findings provide pedagogical implications for employing instructional conversation in EFL speaking classrooms.

Index Terms—instructional conversations, oral autonomy, speaking ability

I. INTRODUCTION

The ability to speak English as foreign language (EFL) appears to be the primary purpose of EFL students. Speaking can be improved through a variety of techniques introduced by EFL teachers to their students. According to Brown and Yule (1983) many language learners view speaking as the criteria for knowing a language and one's progress is assessed in terms of his/her achievement in spoken communication.

Celce-Murcia (2001) states that for most people the ability to speak a language means to know that language because human communication requires the speech. Many language learners worldwide study English with the aim of improving their speaking (Marzban & Hashemi, 2012). Speaking a foreign language seems to differ from speaking a native one due to different structures, vocabularies, cultural factors, and so on. The process of learning to speak a foreign language is, therefore, complex. Richards and Renandya (2002) view the ability to speak a second language well as a very complex task. Speaking a language is particularly difficult for foreign language learners because the occurrence of an effective oral communication the ability to use the language appropriately in social interactions in necessary (Marzban & Hashemi, 2012). Overall, it can be concluded that speaking skill is worthy to bring up the newly developed issue, instructional conversation method, which might significantly affect the development of speaking ability. Before dealing with the issue it is worth presenting a background of it.

Communicative competence, according to Boyd and Miller (2000), involves the ability to interpret and enact suitable social behaviors and requires the learner to actively participate in producing the target language. Thus the learner needs to do more than one-word answers in the target language or memorize separated sentences (Pinkevičienė, 2011). The learner needs to be actively engaged in building and clarifying meaning. EFL teachers, on the other hand, need to provide opportunities in the classroom to engage students in talking.

Wells and Haneda (2005) view learners as active agents who, along with their teachers, participate in a form of conversational discourse aims at improving understanding rather than the one-way transmission of teacher-directed instructional talk. In this case the target language becomes the vehicle for communicating ideas rather than an instructional tool (Pinkevičienė, 2011).

Thrap and Galimore (1988) minted the term "Instructional Conversation" (IC: Talk about text). Instructional Conversation: contains a paradox: 'Instruction' and 'Conversation' appear contrary, the one implying authority and planning, the other equality and responsiveness (Thrap & Gallimore, 1988 as cited in Wells & Haneda, 2005, p.151).

Curenton and Zucker (2013) view ICs as planned discussions with small groups of children where teachers improve students' collaborative reasoning by using challenging questions which necessitate students to use complex language to talk about their experiences, knowledge, and opinions. IC appears to result in autonomous EFL learners since autonomy is dependent upon learners' ability to self-direct for practice, critical reflection, and independent action (Andrade, 2012). Bocanegra and Haidl (1999) believe that learner autonomy, as a new field of study, has gradually come into existence since the 1970s as a consequence of a new shift in interest in research on language learning: learners have gradually been viewed as producers of language and less as learners of a system imposed on them by society. Kulsirisawad (2012), regards emphasis upon the students' role rather than the teacher's as a key principle of learner autonomy. Little (1991) points out that "autonomy in language depends on the development and exercise of a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision making and independent action" (p. 4). The present study focuses on oral autonomy which can be defined as EFL learner's ability of taking charge of his/her speaking and listening English. From this point of view, instructional conversation can provide an opportunity in which EFL learners need to self-direct for practice. In this view students are viewed as active agents who actively engage in the process of speaking. However, the present study aims at investigating the effects of using instructional conversation as a means of enhancement of speaking ability as well as oral autonomy among Iranian intermediate EFL learners.

A. *Research Questions*

The following research question was posed by the researcher:

Q1: Does the use of Instructional Conversation have any significant effect on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' oral autonomy?

B. *Research Null-hypotheses*

Accordingly the following null-hypothesis was formulated:

H01: Use of Instructional Conversation does not have any significant effect on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' oral autonomy.

II. REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

Speaking seems to be the primary purpose of EFL learners. The recent EFL classrooms tend to create autonomous learners who try to learn independently. Learner autonomy is achieved when such conditions as motivation and attitudes and learning strategies on the part of the learner, and materials are available. To achieve autonomy there has to be a teacher on whom it will be incumbent to show the way to autonomous learning (Hadi, 2012).

The social disciplines of the last half century have made it probable to describe another sort of instruction, and how to aid teachers do it. Investigation on instruction has been roused in the past few years by some influential ideas from recently interpreted works of a Russian psychologist who passed away more than 50 years ago. L. S. Vygotsky's thoughts are deeply touching our understanding of teaching, learning, and cognitive growth through the work of numerous neo-Vygotsky an socio-historical philosophers and investigators in several nations who now elaborate, correct, and develop this body of work (e.g., Cazden, 1981; Rogoff & Wertsch, 1984; Tharp & Gallimore, 1989; Wertsch & Stone, 1985).

Amid the most auspicious methods in modern educational theory is the sociocultural viewpoint, in which the opinion that information is socially created is further advanced and prolonged. The goal of this study is to discover the potential of socio-culturally based teaching, mainly the Instructional Conversation (IC), to raise the contribution in teaching and learning actions of both instructors and their language minority students. This approach seems to have important prospective to advance, simultaneously, the learning of academic content ideas and growth in the language of instruction per se. This is because instructional practices founded on socio-cultural theory highlight activity and the simultaneous message of the sense of the action through language. Language's basic purpose is socio-cultural: to replicate speaker identity and attitudes. Timing and tone of delivery, in spoken language, are important for endorsing or obstructing teaching and learning irrespective of the overall quality of teaching (Cazden, 1986).

Reveles (2004) describes IC as a teaching strategy in which conversation takes place among small groups of students. These conversations are not random rather they are academically goal-oriented. In such classrooms, Reveles (2004) explains, the students speak more than the teacher; the teacher therefore becomes a listener and facilitator. "IC protocol is a way to transform a classroom into a more productive learning community through dialogic teaching" (Reveles, 2004, p.1).

IC is most often enacted in a small group through employment of familiar forms of conversation to improve learners' language production and understanding. Teachers who employ IC take the advantage of ordinary conversation about an interesting stimulus or activity to tempt their students to employ social and academic language and to share prior knowledge (Dalton & Sison, 1995). In the interaction, teachers determine levels of students' independence and necessary assistance (Gallimore, Dalton, & Tharp, 1986, as cited in Dalton & Sison, 1995). In IC, teachers investigate to gather information about students' Zones of Proximal Development (ZPD). Therefore, the format of an IC, from the beginning, is neither exactly prescribed nor pre-scripted; however, it mirrors a plan composed of anticipated options and some unanticipated ones to gain selected outcomes. Outcomes are proximal in collecting information of students' prior

knowledge and their ZPDs, and distal for facilitating students' understanding and knowledge construction (Dalton & Sison, 1995).

Based on IC learners have to play a key role in learning new materials and becoming aware of the world. Therefore, the teacher plays the role of facilitator rather than transmitter. Accordingly, rather than providing step-by-step instructions designed to produce right answer to correct performance, the teacher in IC encourages students' ideas and generally guides students to sophisticated levels of comprehension (Aidinlou, & Tabeei, 2012). Dalton and Sison (1995) described four ICs taught by a novice teacher. The ICs aimed at fostering interaction about math concepts in small groups of seventh grade students who were ordinarily excluded from classroom participation by their regular teacher. Results indicated that all the students participated comfortably in academic conversation using math lexicon with increasing appropriacy and focus. Intersubjectivity emerged in the conversations and was apparently built on the students' and teacher's similar and shared experience in constructive social interaction about math. Students' participation in IC increased dramatically and stabilized across the four ICs which indicated the effectiveness of this pedagogy to include often excluded language minority students in classroom interaction (Dalton & Sison 1995).

Concerning the effects of IC in EFL contexts several studies have been already conducted. For example Aidinlou and Tabeei (2012) in their study on the effects of using instructional conversation method on reading comprehension of Iranian EFL learners indicated advantages of instructional conversation in English students' reading comprehension. It was found that the participants in the IC groups performed better than those in control group in reading comprehension post-test. Moreover, significant differences were found between performances of two experimental groups. These findings showed that a combination of instructional conversation method and traditional method was more effective than instructional conversation alone (Aidinlou, & Tabeei, 2012). Dincer, Yesilyurt and Takkac (2012) in an article "The Effects of Autonomy-Supportive Climates on EFL Learners' engagement, achievement in English speaking classrooms" found that creating an autonomous environment could result in high levels of perceived competence in speaking. Moreover, autonomy-supportive teacher behaviors had positive correlations with perceived competence and these behaviors were engagement in English speaking lessons and achievements (Dincer et al., 2012). Khaki (2013) investigated the relationship between learner autonomy and Willingness to Communicate (WTC) in Iranian EFL learners. The results indicated a meaningful and strong relationship between learner autonomy and trait-like WTC in Iranian EFL learners and a significant but weak correlation between learner autonomy and situational WTC in Iranian EFL learners. Therefore, Khaki (2013) concludes that a meaningful relationship between learner autonomy and WTC can be seen in Iranian EFL learners supported by the regression analysis.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Participants and Setting

Participants included 49 Iranian intermediate EFL learners studying English as their foreign language in three language institutes in Sarakhs. These participants were selected through administering Nelson Test developed by Fowler and Coe (1976). All of them were female and their age ranged from 18 to 24.

B. Instrumentations

The following instrumentations were employed by the author.

Nelson Proficiency Test

In order to select homogeneous participants, Nelson proficiency test (series 200A), developed by Fowler and Coe, 1976, and was administered to 110 Iranian EFL learners in Sarakhs, Iran. The test contained 50 multiple-choice items and participants were allowed to respond in 40 minutes. The test mainly assessed the participants' vocabulary knowledge and grammar. After analyzing the results of this test, 49 participants who could obtain at least 70% of the total score were selected as the participants of this study (Appendix A).

Learner Oral Autonomy Questionnaire

In order to measure the participants' oral autonomy, Kashefian's learner autonomy questionnaire (2002) was modified in such a manner to assess the participants' autonomy in oral ability. The questionnaire included 20 multiple-choice items based on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. The modified questionnaire was piloted to make sure of its reliability. Results of Cronbach's Alpha supported that the questionnaire was relatively reliable ($\alpha=.79$). (Appendix B). The following Table shows the results.

TABLE 1
RESULTS OF CHRONBACH'S ALPHA

Questionnaire	N. of Items	Chronbach's Alpha
Oral Autonomy	20	.79

The content validity of the questionnaire was confirmed by three EFL professors at Islamic Azad University in Torbat-e Heydarieh.

C. Procedure

Forty-nine Iranian intermediate EFL learners from language institutes in Sarakhs were selected as the participants. Nelson Test was administered as a homogenizing tool. The qualified participants (N=49) were randomly assigned to control (n=24) and experimental (n=25) groups. Oral autonomy questionnaire was administered at the beginning of the study as the pretest. During the course which lasted for 12 sessions, participants in the experimental class received the treatment, Instructional Conversations (ICs). Every session they were provided with copies of a reading text. These students were allowed to practice the reading materials as a whole class, in small groups, or even in pairs. These participants were provided with a time (25 minutes) to analyze and discuss their own ideas on the text. The teacher managed the process of discussion to correct the mistakes committed by the students. Oral discussions were made by these participants after completing the task. Sometimes the teacher, explained more about the issue and clarified the complex parts with which the students had problems. Since the focus of the present study was on enhancing the students' oral autonomy, the teacher provided the class with opportunities to discuss about the passage in groups and pairs. Creating a question-answer environment, the teacher engaged the students in an oral discussion activity.

Participants in the control group were taught the same materials as those practiced in the experimental group through role playing and peer dialogues. Finally participants in both groups sat for the posttest, e.g. Learner Oral Autonomy Questionnaire.

IV. DATA ANALYSIS

After obtaining required data from the instrument, data were analyzed by employing SPSS (19.0).

A. Results of Reliability

First it was necessary to make sure of the reliability of oral autonomy; therefore Chronbach's Alpha was calculated by using SPSS (19.0). Results are shown in Table 1.

TABLE 2
RESULTS OF CHRONBACH'S ALPHA

Questionnaire	N. of Items	Chronbach's Alpha
Oral Autonomy	20	.79

As Table 1 shows, the observed value confirmed the reliability of the instrument ($\alpha=.79$).

B. Results of Normality of Data

To make sure that the data are normal, a normalizing test, Smirnov-Kolmogorov Test, was conducted. Results are shown in Table 2.

TABLE 3
ONE-SAMPLE KOLMOGOROV-SMIRNOV TEST

		Nelson	Autonomypre	Autonomypost
N		49	49	49
Normal	Mean	37.7347	62.4490	66.7959
Parametersa	Std. Deviation	2.12892	6.87102	6.78841
Most Extreme	Absolute	.160	.074	.089
Differences	Positive	.160	.074	.089
	Negative	-.112	-.073	-.076
Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z		1.118	.520	.624
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)		.164	.950	.831
a. Test distribution is Normal.				

Table 2 summarizes the data related to normalizing test. Null-hypothesis of Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test indicates that the data are normal. Since P-values obtained in the test for the instruments administered are greater than .05, (p-value for Nelson=.164>.05; p-value for autonomypre=.95>.05; p-value for autonomypost=.831>.05) the null-hypothesis is supported.

C. Results of Independent Samples T-test for Nelson

Table 3 shows results obtained from independent samples t-test for Nelson proficiency test.

TABLE 4
RESULTS OF INDEPENDENT SAMPLES T-TEST FOR NELSON

Group	N	M	SD	Df	T	sig(2-tailed)
Control	24	37.66	2.21	47	.21	.82
experimental	25	37.80	2.08			

As Table 3 shows there is not any significant difference [$df=47$, $t=.21$, $sig(2-tailed)=.82>.05$] between control (N=24, M=37.66, SD=2.21) and experimental (N=25, M=37.80, SD=2.08) groups in Nelson. Therefore, the homogeneity of the participants was confirmed at the outset of the study.

D. Results of Independent Samples T-test for Oral Autonomy (Pretest)

- A) No, are five B) No, there are three C) No, there's one D) No, there are any
8. Tom often sings, but
- A) Sings Sarah? B) Sarah sings? C) Sarah does? D) does Sarah?
9. Tony is looking at
- A) She B) he C) her D) here
10. Who's that boy?
- A) Is Bill B) It's Tom C) It's a boy D) Peter's that
11. Where's the book?
- A) There's it B) He's under the chair C) It's he D) There's on a chair
12. Are you happy?
- A) Yes, I'm B) No, I aren't C) Yes, I am D) No, I not
13. What's his name?
- A) It's name Jack B) It's a Jack C) It's Jack's name D) It's Jack
14. Do you dance or draw?
- A) I'm dance but I'm not draw B) I dance but I don't draw
C) I'm dancing but I not drawing D) I dance but I'm not drawing
15. Is that a book?
- A) Yes, there is B) Yes, it is C) Yes, that's D) Yes, is a book
16. Is that horse big?
- A) No, that's a little B) No, that's little horse
C) No, It's little horse D) No, It isn't
17. What's her brother doing?
- A) Playing football B) Is playing football
C) He playing football D) She's playing football
18. How many chairs are there in the room?
- A) Are four B) Are five chairs there C) There's one D) there's a chair
19. A) Is that table big brown? B) Is that big brown table?
C) Is that big table brown? D) Is brown that big table?
20. A) Mary can dance tomorrow B) Mary cans dance tomorrow
C) Mary she can dance tomorrow D) Mary can tomorrow dance
21. The lamp is the television.
- A) at B) next to C) near of D) between
22. The tree is the door.
- A) between B) in front C) beside D) next
23. What's that girl?
- A) It's a student B) She's student C) She's a student D) She's a student girl
24. Do the girls know Tom?
- A) Yes, they knows her B) No, they isn't
C) Yes, they know D) No, they don't
25. A) John's looking at I and you B) Your looking at John and
C) I'm looking at you and John D) John and I am looking at you
26. A) That girl is some of my friends B) This girl is one of my friends
C) That girl is me friend D) This girl's are friends
27. A) This is Mr. Smith there B) That is the Mr. Smith there
C) This is the Mr. Smith here D) That is Mr. Smith there
28. My brother is writing
- A) by a pencil B) with pen C) in a paper D) in a book
29. A) Who now in London lives? B) Who in London now live?
C) Who lives in London now? D) Who live now in London?
30. Monday is the first day.
- A) Tuesday is the second. B) The second is Thursday.
C) Tuesday is the fourth. D) The fourth is Thursday.
31. Jane is in front of Tom. Tom is Jane.
- A) beside B) behind C) before D) between
32. Tom is Mrs. Smith's son.
- A) She is his son. B) She is her son. C) He is her son. D) He is his son.
33. A) Come here to us! B) Go here to we!
C) Go there to us! D) Come here to my
34. A) Don't look at us! B) Don't looking at us!
C) No looking at we! D) Not look at us

35. A) Some girl are listening to the old men B) An old man is listening to the girl
C) An old men are listening the girl D) The old man are listening to a girl
36. A) Listen to he and he's brother! B) Listen to he and his brother!
C) Listen to him and his brother! D) Listen to him and he's brother!
37. Whose hats are those? They are Hats.
A) he's B) Mr. Black's C) Mrs. Black's D) she's
38. A) Where are you going to put the cups? B) Where are you going put the cups?
C) Where you're going put the cups? D) Where you are going to put the cups?
39. Jane's tall and
A) John's, too B) Tom is, too C) Tom is to D) Tom are two
40. Does Brain play football?
A) Yes, and Sam doesn't, too B) No, but Sam doesn't
C) Yes, but Sam doesn't D) No, and Sam does, too
41. James is talking to
A) they B) them C) she D) your
42. These pens are
A) Pats B) of Pat C) Pat's D) to Pat
43. Sarah cat.
A) haves a B) haves some C) has some D) has a
44. This is
A) second lesson B) the lesson two C) lesson the second D) lesson two
45. A) Lena cans have Mikes' radio B) Lena can has Mikes' radio
C) Lena can have Mikes' radio D) Lena can has Mikes' radio
46. It's 21.00.
A) Yes, it's nine in the evening B) Yes, it's nine clocks
C) Yes, it's nine in the afternoon D) yes, it's nine hours
47. 164 is
A) hundred sixty four B) a hundred sixty four
C) hundred sixty and four D) a hundred and sixty four
48. A) The girls don't do the homework B) The girls don't the homework
C) The girls doesn't do the homework D) The girls don't does the homework
49. Do Mr. and Mrs. Smith speak English?
A) He does but she doesn't B) He speak but she doesn't
C) He do but she don't D) He speak but she don't
50. Who are those boys? One is my brother and
A) the big boy is Peter B) a big boy is Peter
C) the big boy is a Peter D) a big boy is a Peter

APPENDIX B

Oral Autonomy Questionnaire

With some adoptions from Hashemian & Fadaei (2013)

Sex: Major: Marital Status: Grade: Age:

Average:

Directions: Please show how much you agree or disagree with the following statements by circling the numbers that match your answers.

- 1 The teacher should offer help to me.
Strongly agree No idea Disagree Strongly disagree
- 2 The teacher should tell me what my difficulties are.
Strongly agree Agree No idea Disagree Strongly disagree
- 3 The teacher should tell me how long I should spend on oral activities.
Strongly agree Agree No idea Disagree Strongly disagree
- 4 The role of the teacher is to help me to speak effectively.
Strongly agree Agree No idea Disagree Strongly disagree
- 5 The teacher knows best how well I am in oral ability.
Strongly agree Agree No idea Disagree Strongly disagree
- 6 The role of the teacher is to create opportunities for me to speak.
Strongly agree Agree No idea Disagree Strongly disagree
- 7 The role of the teacher is to set my learning goals with respect to oral ability.
Strongly agree Agree No idea Disagree Strongly disagree
- 8 The teacher should be an expert at showing learners how to speak in English.

Strongly agree	Agree	No idea	Disagree	Strongly disagree
9	I need the teacher to tell me how my oral ability is progressing.			
Strongly agree	Agree	No idea	Disagree	Strongly disagree
10	I know how to check my oral ability for mistakes.			
Strongly agree	Agree	No idea	Disagree	Strongly disagree
11	Having my speaking evaluated by others is helpful.			
Strongly agree	Agree	No idea	Disagree	Strongly disagree
12	My speaking success depends on what I do in classroom.			
Strongly agree	Agree	No idea	Disagree	Strongly disagree
13	My own efforts play an important role in successful oral ability.			
Strongly agree	Agree	No idea	Disagree	Strongly disagree
14	I myself can find the best way to improve my oral ability.			
Strongly agree	Agree	No idea	Disagree	Strongly disagree
15	I know how to ask for help when I need it.			
Strongly agree	Agree	No idea	Disagree	Strongly disagree
16	I have the ability to develop my oral ability.			
Strongly agree	Agree	No idea	Disagree	Strongly disagree
17	I have the ability to get the score I try for in my next speaking test.			
Strongly agree	Agree	No idea	Disagree	Strongly disagree
18	I am above average at language learning, especially in oral ability.			
Strongly agree	Agree	No idea	Disagree	Strongly disagree
19.	I have my own ways of testing my oral ability.			
Strongly agree	Agree	No idea	Disagree	Strongly disagree
20	I myself can determine the time spent on oral development.			
Strongly agree	Agree	No idea	Disagree	Strongly disagree

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