Group-Work Dynamics: Its effects on EFL IELTS Candidates' Structural Accuracy and

Self-Regulation

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Abstract

Group-work dynamics has been assumed to explain a great part of impact in language learning and teaching in specific contexts or for particular skills. In the same vein, structural accuracy has been significant in foreign language learning. Today, foreign language learning is not limited to the classroom environment. In addition, it encompasses the learner's lives, so that self-regulation's role seems to be prominent. Accordingly, this study explored the effect of group-work dynamics on EFL IELTS candidates' structural accuracy and self-regulation. The findings of this quasi-experimental mixed-method study revealed that group-work dynamics did not have a significant effect on the structural accuracy and self-regulation of the participants. Overall, as the analysis of the open-ended questions confirmed, the employment of Group-work Dynamics was not appealing to the students as they emphasized that learning grammatical points and structural notes requires more control of the teacher rather than peers. Moreover, they highlighted that they believed that group work and other tasks need to be practiced in a conversation class to enhance the speaking skill.

1. Introduction

Over the past decades, being successful in IELTS exam consists of gaining development of different skills and techniques. Learning does not happen in isolation. It takes place in a variety of contexts. Group-work dynamics, as a conceptual framework, provides a heuristic approach for understanding how effective groups both work and improve our knowledge of the impact of those processes on learners. Group-work dynamics is a general term which focuses on relationships of the learners in groups, and the effect of this on other learners.

Thus, the current study relies heavily on the sociocultural theory which argues that learning and language development occur primarily through the social interactions and an individual's cognition is primarily a result of social processes (Vygotsky, 1978, cited in Lantolf & Throne, 2006). Moreover, a dynamic perspective views self and context as aspects that various learner internal cognitive and affective variables connect to through an integration of some diverse elements in the social environment to influence language development (Poupore, 2015).

Furthermore, the concept of group work dynamics lends itself to ideas related to social constructivism which consider learning as a form of active discovery and knowledge construction which happens through such activities like authentic social cultural relationships, cooperative learning, problem solving, shared meaning and an emphasis on the zone of proximal development (ZPD) to facilitate learning through scaffolding teamwork, providing opportunities to collaborate, and other related activities (Kivunja, 2014). According to Beck and Kosnik (2006) a program formed based on a constructivist models is subject to modifications and would not be considered as a fixed program. This can be considered as one of the drawbacks of such an approach. As far as a teacher's role is concerned in constructivism, the role changes from a

conveyer of knowledge to a facilitator and helper for the construction of knowledge instead of reproduction of a series of facts (Fosnot, 1996; Kivunja, 2014).

On the other hand, as far as structural accuracy is concerned, the theory of language teaching/learning here relies on Emergenism. Emergenism emphasizes the importance of integrating the following two approaches: on one hand, there is a need to sort out the significant and necessary innate abilities in human which inherently enable one to acquire the language, and, on the other hand, there is a need to understand the environment`s reflective impacts on the learners, the learning process, as well as the end learning product (Ellis, 1998). Thus, Emergenism also provides the grounds for the teaching of language points with regards to the environmental impacts such as peer effects. Moreover, on the part of language teaching, cooperative language learning and task-based teaching are suggested. This area of educational theory involves a group-based dynamics approach that has been developed by social and educational psychologists, (Dorney & Malderez, 1999).

However, as Toseland and Gellis (2015) maintain, effectiveness of the groups depends heavily on an understanding of the group dynamic processes as they arise during the continuing interaction of group members, a consideration of the impact of these dynamics on members, an assessment of the impact of emerging dynamics on group functioning, and guiding the development of group dynamics which will facilitate the participation of members and satisfaction while concurrently enabling the group to attain its goals.

All in all, academic views on the drive to employ group-work dynamics may differ but a review of literature supports group work as a context which may enhance learning, on the condition that consideration is given to different issues such as group size, formation, skills development, and assessment strategies (Rossin & Hyland, 2010). Freeman and Gahungu (2013)

also refer to many benefits received through group work dynamics including a positive social climate, a greater sense of belongingness; a greater feeling of security and well-being; a higher level of autonomous and self-regulated behavior; a stronger sense of identity; a higher level of interest and engagement; and a higher academic achievement.

According to Johnson and Johnson (2003), group processes and learners' potentials in creating new knowledge and in experiencing transformative learning are all connected to the dynamics and the processes of the group. Thus, placing individuals within a team can either reduce or increase their potential. Though many scholars have discussed the positive effects and advantages of group work dynamics, there seem to be disadvantages sometimes. For example, Beebe and Masterson (2003, p. 12) list four of the disadvantages as follows:

1. There may be pressure from the group to conform to the majority opinion. Most people do not like conflict and attempt to avoid it when possible. By readily acquiescing to the majority opinion, the individual may agree to a bad solution just to avoid conflict.
2. An individual may dominate the discussion. This leads to members not gaining satisfaction from the group because they feel too alienated in the decision making process.
3. Some members may rely too heavily on others to do the work. This is one of the most salient problems that face groups. Some members do not pitch in and help and do not adequately contribute to the group (Freeman & Greenacre, 2011). One solution to this problem is to make every group member aware of the goals and objectives of the group and assign specific tasks or responsibilities to each member.
4. It takes more time to work in a group than to work alone. It takes longer to accomplish tasks when working with others. However, the time spent taking and analyzing problems usually results in better solutions.

Thus, it can be concluded that apart from all the advantages attributed to group work and its dynamics, there are drawbacks and pitfalls and there have been contradictory views.

Moreover, structural accuracy is a key element in the correct use of the language. Accuracy along with fluency has always been significant in producing a foreign language. Structural accuracy is the ability to use the language correctly and grammar instruction in any language learning program aims mainly at uplifting accuracy in learners (Mart, 2013). It is the foundation for any language learning which enhances flexibility in usage and language production. Furthermore, having a sufficient knowledge of structural accuracy is effective for IELTS candidates especially in the writing section. It is also confirmed that for effective communication, a learner needs to attain structural accuracy. It is the role of accuracy in effective communication; therefore, that has made the instruction of structures essential in any language teaching/learning practice (Ellis, 2008; Rimmer, 2006; Siti Rohani, 2007).

Self-regulation has been defined as the ability of developing, implementing, and flexibly maintaining planned behavior with the intention of achieving one's goals (Brown, Miller & Lawendowski, 1999). It is an active process of self-management (Miedijensky & Lichtinger, 2016) which has been considered as having a focal role in learning (Bernier, Carlson, & Whipple, 2010; Duru, Duru, & Murat, 2014; Schunk & Ertmer, 2000; Zimmerman & Cleary, 2009). Numerous studies over the past decades (e.g., Boekaerts & Corno, 2005; Schunk & Ertmer, 2000; Schunk & Zimmerman, 2007) have addressed the issue of identifying self-regulation processes and the possible correlations between them, motivation, and academic success. Scholars have focused on characterizing general and specific self-regulation processes, and identifying cognitive strategies, meta-cognitive strategies (setting goals, planning, monitoring, and self-testing), motivational strategies (self-encouragement and self-award), and resource-regulation (attention, social environments, and scheduling) that allow students in directing their learning and achieving their academic goals (Garcia & Pintrich, 1994;

Zimmerman, 2001, 2008). As the present study mainly focuses on the definitions of self-regulation provided by Miller, Brown and Lawendowski (1999), their seven-step model of self-regulation is discussed. In this model, behavioral self-regulation may falter due to the failure or shortfalls at any of the following seven steps: 1. receiving the pertinent information 2. evaluating the information and comparing it to norms 3. triggering change 4. searching for options 5. formulating a plan 6. implementing the plan 7. assessing the plan's effectiveness (which recycles to steps 1 and 2).

However, in the field of language teaching, there seems to be a dearth of research. Several researchers (Becker, 2003; Gorse & Sanderson, 2007; Poupore, 2015, etc.) have conducted studies on different skills and for the improvement of different practices but the effect of group-work dynamics has been untouched as far as structural accuracy is concerned. Thus, the aim of the present study was to investigate the effect of group-work dynamics on IELTS candidates' structural accuracy and self-regulation. Hence, based on the objectives of the study the following research questions were formed:

Q1. Does group-work dynamics have any significant effects on the Iranian IELTS candidates' structural accuracy?

Q2. Does group-work dynamics have any significant effects on the Iranian IELTS candidates' self-regulation?

Q3. What are the attitudes (advantages and disadvantages) of the Iranian IELTS participants towards group-work dynamics?

2. METHODOLOGY

The present study employed a mixed-method quasi-experimental design which included an intervention for 10 sessions.

2.1 Participants and Setting

The accessible population for the present study included a group of 40 IELTS candidates in preparatory courses aged 18 to 40. To have a sufficient number of participants, it needs to be mentioned that in causal-comparative and experimental as well as quasi-experimental studies a sample size of no fewer than fifteen cases is needed (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000). In the same vein, according to Creswell (2012) the number of participants for experimental kinds of research including treatments, needs to be between 15 to 50, so it is enough to put at least 15 participants in each group.

2.2 Instrumentation

To collect data, two instruments and one data collection technique were employed. The two instruments included the structure section of the TOEFL (PBT) test and the self-regulation questionnaire (SRQ) by Brown, Miller and Lawendowski (1999). Also, a researcher-made open-ended questionnaire was administered to collect data qualitatively on the candidates' attitudes.

2.3 Instructional materials and teaching procedures in experimental and control groups

To improve the IELTS candidates' performance on IELTS, the focus of the teachers in the institution were data was collected was on the improvement of structural accuracy. The items in each chapter were the same for the control and experimental group. The specific structures that were taught consisted of: verbs, auxiliary verbs, nouns, pronouns, modifiers, comparatives,

connectives, sentences and clauses, point of view, agreement, introductory verbal modifiers, parallel structure, redundancy and word choice. The following table demonstrates the teaching procedure for the control group.

Table 1

Teaching procedure in the control group

Stage	Procedure	Purpose	Time	Interaction
1.Topic introduction	The teacher introduces the topic and gives the key words.	Students orientation to the topic	15 minutes	Teacher-Class
2.Personalization	Students are given a chance to brainstorm on what they are supposed to apply for.	Activating the passive knowledge	15 minutes	Students
3.Individual	Students work out their ideas one by one to finalize what they are going to write about.	Individual learning	15 minutes	Students
4.Production	Students try to make sentences by new structure about the topic they have already worked out.	Self-production	30 minutes	Individual student
5.Revision	Students check their sentences with the hint that teacher writes on the board.	Individual checking	15 minutes	Only student

As is shown in the above table, there were no student-student interaction. The next table (table 2) presents the procedure for the experimental group.

Table 2

Teaching procedure in the experimental group

Stage	Procedure	Objective	Time	Interaction
1.Topic introduction	The teacher introduces the topic and gives the key words containing new structure.	Students orientation to the topic	15 minutes	Teacher--Class
2.Personalization	Students are given a chance to brainstorm on what they are supposed to apply for.	Activating the passive knowledge	15 minutes	Students
3.Peer check	Students work out their ideas with their peers to finalize what they are going to write about.	Peer learning	15 minutes	Student-Student
4.Production	Students write about the topic they have already worked out.	Self-production	30 minutes	student
5.Revision	Students exchange the piece of work and give each other feedbacks.	Peer check	15 minutes	Student-Student

As is shown in the above table, the researcher provided the grounds for more interaction among the students through peer check and revision phases. In the context of the present study based on Browns' (2000) ideas different tasks were given to the participants. Accordingly, group-work dynamics was situated by a combination of tasks such as cooperative project, jigsaw, brainstorming, and problem-solving.

3. DATA ANALYSES

To begin with, the following table (Table 3) presents the descriptive statistics of the tests used in the study. Also, the reliability of the grammar test was measured.

Table 3

Descriptive statistics for the tests used in the study

	Pre_Gram	Pre_Regu	Post_Gram	Post_Regu
Mean	20.30	200.62	24.27	214.85
Std. Deviation	3.96	26.99	3.75	19.60
Variance	15.70	728.90	14.10	384.18
Minimum	11.00	123.00	15.00	159.00
Maximum	28.00	240.00	30.00	240.00

The normality of the distributions of all the tests was also tested. As Table 4 shows, most values

are within the "very good" range.

Table 4

Test of normality for the measures used in the study

	Pre_Gram	Pre_Regu	Post_Gram	Post_Regu
Skewness	-.35	-.99	-.47	-1.25
Std. Error of Skewness	.37	.37	.37	.37
Kurtosis	-.04	.69	-.38	.99
Std. Error of Kurtosis	.73	.73	.73	.73

Based on the results displayed in Table 5 it can be concluded that the KR-21 reliability indices

for the pretest and posttest of self-regulation were .95 and .93. The pretest and posttest of

grammar had reliability indices of .60 and .69.

Table 5

KR-21 Reliability Indices; Pretests and Posttests of Grammar and Self-Regulation

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance	KR-21
Pretest of Grammar	40	20.30	3.96	15.70	.60
Pretest of Self-Regulation	40	200.63	26.99	728.90	.95
Posttest of Grammar	40	24.28	3.75	14.10	.69
Posttest of Self-Regulation	40	214.85	19.60	384.18	.93

An independent samples t-test was run to compare the candidates' means on the pretest

and posttest of structural accuracy. First, the pretest means were compared to examine prior

differences before the study. The independent samples t-test results demonstrated that the difference between the two means was not statistically significant, t (38) =.15, p=.87, mean difference=.20, 95% CI ranging from -2.36 to 2.76, with very small effect size, eta squared=0.00.

Table 6
Independent Samples Test for pre-test of grammar

| | | Levene's Test for Equality of Variances | | t-test for Equality of Means | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | | | | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | |
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Pre_Gram	Equal variances assumed	1.51	.22	.15	38	.87	.20	1.26	-2.36	2.76
	Equal variances not assumed			.15	35.04	.87	.20	1.26	-2.37	2.77

The following table (table 7) demonstrates the means and the standard deviations of both groups for the pretest on structural accuracy.

Table 7
Descriptive statistics for pretest on Structural Accuracy for the experimental and control groups

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Experimental	20.40	20	4.55	1.01
Control	20.20	20	3.38	.75

The independent samples t-test results demonstrated that the difference between the two means was not statistically significant, t (38) =.88, p=.38, mean difference=1.05, 95% CI ranging from -1.36 to 3.46, with very small effect size, eta squared=.01.

Table 8

Independent Samples Test for post-test of grammar

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Post_Gram	Equal variances assumed	2.16	.15	.88	38	.38	1.05	1.19	-1.36	3.46
	Equal variances not assumed			.88	35.08	.38	1.05	1.19	-1.36	3.46

Also, an independent samples t-test was run to compare the candidates' means on the pretest and posttest of self-regulation. First, the pretest means of the self-regulation scores were compared to examine prior differences before the study. The following table (Table 9) demonstrates the means and the standard deviations of both groups for the pretest on self-regulation.

Table 9

Descriptive statistics for the pretest on self-regulation for the experimental & control groups

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Experimental	205.30	20	27.93	6.24
Control	195.95	20	25.87	5.78

The independent samples t-test results (Table 10) demonstrated that the difference between the two means was not statistically significant, t (38) =1.09, p=.27, mean difference=9.35, 95% CI ranging from -7.88 to 26.58, with very small effect size, eta squared=.03.

Table 10

Independent Samples Test for pre-test of self-regulation

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Pre_Regu	Equal variances assumed	.34	.55	1.09	38	.27	9.35	8.51	-7.88	26.58
	Equal variances not assumed			1.09	37.77	.27	9.35	8.51	-7.89	26.59

To examine whether the treatment was effective the control and experimental groups were compared on the posttest means. An independent sample t-test was run on the self-regulation means. The following table (Table 11) demonstrates the means and the standard deviations of both groups for the posttest on structural accuracy.

Table 11

Descriptive Statistics for posttest on self-regulation for the experimental and control groups

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Experimental	217.95	20	20.166	4.50
Control	211.75	20	19.01	4.25

The independent samples t-test results demonstrated that the difference between the two means was not statistically significant, t (38) =1, p=.32, mean difference=6.20, 95% CI ranging from -6.34 to 18.74, with very small effect size, eta squared=.02.

Table 12

Independent Samples Test for post-test of self-regulation

| | | Levene's Test for Equality of Variances | | t-test for Equality of Means | | | | | | |
| | | F | Sig. | t | df | Sig. (2-tailed) | Mean Difference | Std. Error Difference | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | |
									Lower	Upper
Post_Regu	Equal variances assumed	.04	.84	1.00	38	.32	6.20	6.19	-6.34	18.74
	Equal variances not assumed			1.00	37.87	.32	6.20	6.19	-6.34	18.74

To analyze the participants' answers to the third research question, the researcher sifted through the data to find the most occurring themes and subthemes as well as to decide on the general attitudes of the participants .To do this, two sub-questions were formulated to focus on likes and dislikes as well as the practicality as follows:

Q1. What did you like or dislike about the group-work dynamics?

Q2. What is your idea about employing group-work dynamics? How practical was it for you?

The following themes were found based on the participants' ideas. Table 13 lists the points mentioned by the participants related to the advantages of group work dynamics.

Table 13

		The advantages of the work dynamics by the participants
group-mentioned	Helpfulness for better understanding Repetition of structures in groups Peer correction Nice atmosphere of the class Providing a relaxed situation Usefulness for the fostering of improvement in exercises Sharing ideas Using other's ideas in groups Providing an enjoyable learning context	

Similarly, Table 14 shows the list of disadvantages noted by the researcher in the participants' responses.

Table 14

The Disadvantages of the group-work dynamics mentioned by the participants

Determining every individual's status by criticizing other`s time in groups.
Being inappropriate for a grammar class.
Making the environment boring to learn structures.
Preference of speaking rather than working on structures in such groups.
Good for speaking class.
Leading to lack of control over the learning of structures.
Prohibiting the students from individual practice essential for grammar learning.
Being too much time-consuming.
Developing reluctance among the group members in answering in groups.
. Sharing ideas is best for a speaking class.
. No deep learning can happen.
. Less concentration is provided through group activities.

Having identified the advantages and disadvantages, the researcher also looked for the rate of practicality of this context. The following points in Table 15 were extracted.

Table 15

Participants` views on the Practicality of Group-Work Dynamics

Points related to the practicality	Number of participants
. Teacher's facilitating role was not enough.	5
. There was competition among the members so I was anxious.	4
. Sharing of the ideas was not practical for a grammar class.	8
. It was time-consuming for a grammar course.	6
. It was not practical for a grammar class.	10

The following table (table 4.15) represents the frequency of the overall attitudes. As can be seen, 60 % of the participants in the experimental group had an overall negative attitude. It needs to be mentioned that 5 of participants in the experimental group did not hold any positive or negative views towards the course (25%) and only 15% of the participants held a positive attitude towards the provision of Group-work Dynamics.

Table 4.15

Frequency of positive and negative attitudes towards Group-Work Dynamics in the experimental group

number of participants holding		
A negative attitude	A positive attitude	A neutral attitude
12	3	5

Thus, it was found out that this method was not really appealing to a majority as 12 out of 20 participants emphasized that this context cannot be applicable for a grammar course with a focus on structural accuracy.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that the inclusion of different group tasks to provide group-work dynamics failed to help the participants of the present study to improve in their structural accuracy. As any kind of knowledge and experience transformation is closely linked to how a group's dynamics are formed, it can be discussed that group dynamics can be provided through a combination of a variety of tasks and learning activities. Perhaps some tasks might be more appropriate to a group of learners based on the efficacy and practicality. Gorse and Sanderson (2007) clearly emphasize that in the same way group work can provoke thoughts, bring about creativity, or inspire, it can also block or ignore members which will lead to suppression. Thus, it is stressed that the provision of such situations in which learners can experience the benefits as well as feel the limitations of both group and individual work is fundamental. Another researcher who also refers to the challenges of group-work dynamics is Becker (2003) who emphasized that the level of challenge provided through the group-work activity is very important for the determination of success or failure. Thus, it was concluded that for the implementation of group work and provision of such dynamics, it is quite essential to consider prior preparations in terms of strategy teaching and instruction.

Furthermore, literature review also reveals that the few studies which have focused on group-work dynamics have mainly concentrated on interaction and communication. For example, Poupore (2015) investigated the language development and interaction where he employed the group-work dynamics. However, the core of the study was around the social climate provided through such groupings to evaluate the effects on communication. Moreover, other researchers also admit the fact that to function effectively, patterning of the relationships (Jones & Jones, 2002), group composition format (Ehrman & Dornyei, 1998), and the social

interaction which is established (Qureshi & Stormyhr, 2012) must be clearly understood by the teachers.

As far as self-regulation was concerned, it can be concluded that the inclusion of different group tasks to provide group-work dynamics failed to help the participants of the present study to improve in their self-regulation. This can be justified as the impact of these dynamics on members is relatively varied based on the different characteristic features of the members (Toseland & Gellis, 2015). Moreover, Rogers (2002) has indicated that though groups may be helpful in improving achievement, they may on the contrary hinder the individually determined goals of the learners. Also, taking part and getting engaged in group activities is not always appealing to all learners. On the other hand, it has been discussed that an individual is very much affected by the opinion of the majority in a group as conflict is meant to be avoided. So, self-regulation which is an active process of self-management (Miedijensky & Lichtinger, 2016) will be hindered in completing a task that needs other's cooperation. Similarly, a learner's opinions have to be considered as significant (Zimmerman & Schunk, 2001) while in a group this might not happen being affected by the majority and avoiding conflict.

In addition, a feeling of alienation may be felt by the members as one member might dominate the whole group activity which will hinder self-regulation (Beebe & Masterson, 2003). Also, reliance on others may increase to a large extent which will inhibit self-regulatory behavior (Freeman & Greenacre, 2011). Furthermore, some members might be reluctant to participate in group interactions which will in the same way obstruct their sense of self-regulation.

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