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Original Article

How Collaborative Learning Impacts Motivation and Vocabulary Learning: The Case of Iranian High School Learners

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Abstract

It has been shown that collaborative learning can potentially boost the learning of a second language. This study aimed to investigate the effect of collaborative learning on the motivation of EFL learners and their vocabulary learning. The quasi-experimental design was used to investigate the research questions. Two groups of intermediate EFL learners took part in the study; the first group of learners (n= 30) was instructed through the traditional routine (i.e. grammar-translation) while the second group (n=30) was instructed by collaborative task-based instruction. All participants were requested to fill out a motivation questionnaire twice during their course (once at the beginning and once at the end). Participants of both groups were also asked to answer the vocabulary test which was designed based on their course content to assess their vocabulary development throughout the semester (once at the beginning and once at the end). The independent samples *t*-test was used to analyze the data. The findings indicated that engaging them in collaborative learning significantly improved their motivation and vocabulary scores. The results highlight the value of cooperative learning and open new routes in empowering teachers and teacher educators.

Keywords: Collaborative Learning, Cooperative Learning, Motivation, Peer Learning, Vocabulary

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1. Introduction

Collaborative Learning (CL) is generally seen as an effective tool by which learning can be enhanced (Swain, 1997, 2000). According to Dillenbourg (1999), CL is defined as circumstances in which some people practice learning together or try to learn a skill or a content with the help of one another (p. 1); here, the expression two or more people can be regarded as a pair of learners, or a group with more than two members, a bunch of 12 students, a community of hundreds or thousands, and even a larger set of several hundreds of participants as it is becoming more common in the age of social media. Also, the expression "learning together" connotes different forms of interaction from face-to-face interaction to virtual forms of online/offline interaction induced by systematic arrangements (Dillenbourg, 1999). Far back in the 1980s, Vygotsky (1978, 1986) based his well-known paradigm on principles of collaborative learning, claiming that working with more capable peers could lead to the further academic development of a person. In addition, relevant literature presents specific ways in which collaborative learning may contribute to professional growth in academic contexts. Collaborative learning has been widely researched in elementary and secondary schools (Slavin, 1987) because of the younger age of the target group learners, and is considered an important instructional technique in higher education (Bruffee, 2000; Goodsell et al., 1992; Scageret al., 2016) because of its merits for adult learners.

In scientific terms, collaborative learning can assist restructuring a classroom far distanced from traditional lecture-based instructions toward real person-to-person interactions in smaller groups between the teacher and learners. By the completion of pre-defined simple projects, learning is enhanced because learners tend to build upon their personal experiences by interacting with peers. In such a context, the teacher is expected to adopt the role of a facilitator rather than that of a knowledge source (Bruffee, 2000; Van Schaik et al., 2020); but the teacher is not expected to adopt only a passive role (Emmer & Gerwels, 2005). In a systematic review, by synthesizing both quantitative and qualitative evidence of the role of an instructor in collaborative learning, Van Leeuwen and Janssen (2019) observed guidelines for developing pre-service and in-service programs for teacher education. Moreover, this unique classroom experience provides positive effects on learners' cognitive, motivational, and affective development. More precisely, these aspects interface the cognitive and academic development, acquisition of knowledge, clarity in goals of

education, negotiation skills, and the quality of learning efforts in achieving academic goals (Cabrera et al., 2001).

Unfortunately, few empirical studies have been reported on the effects of collaborative learning on EFL learners' vocabulary expansion and motivation. Thus, the present study aimed to examine the impact of collaborative learning on the vocabulary learning of high school students and their motivation.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Collaborative Learning and Motivation

The social concept of collaborative learning mainly originates in Lev Vygotsky's theory of sociocultural issues which viewed learning to be inherently a function of a social process by introducing ZPD or the Zone of Proximal Development (Clapper, 2015; Dillenbourg, 1999). His sociocultural prospects dwell on both the learning context and learners' experience with classmates. This perspective sheds light on the mutual correlation between one's social interaction with the people around them and their cognitive growth. From this perspective, the act of learning is regarded as a social phenomenon by itself, rather than an individualistic process in nature; from this standpoint, interaction swamps the process of learning (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). In addition, it is further viewed as a mandatory step in learners' cognitive development and growth (Donato & McCormick, 1994); notably, all concrete and representational tools that facilitate the interaction of a group of learners are not disjointed from the social ambient in which they are rooted (Clapper, 2015). In another study, Namaziandost et al. (2019) investigated the effect of cooperative learning in English instruction on enhancing Iranian learners' speaking skills and motivations and found significant advances in learners' intrinsic motivation, which was induced by cooperative learning strategies.

Viewed from the Vygotskian standpoint (Vygotsky, 1978), collaborative learning tends to enhance social interaction both among students and between students and a teacher. Indeed, it helps students in benefiting from the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), the latter being described as "the distance between the actual developmental level … and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86). Thus, collaborative learning by nature creates opportunities to ease communication with more capable peers, as well as expand

their developmental power in an active act of participation. Thus, within the ZPD framework, more competent learners present less capable peers with new insight and establish a motivating and mutually advantageous social setting conducive to learning. In addition, the practice of peer scaffolding can serve as a facilitating instrument to expand learners' ZPD, particularly playing an undeniable role for language learners (Clapper, 2015).

2. 2. Collaborative Learning and Vocabulary Expansion

Collaborative learning has been shown to enhance vocabulary learning and expansion as well (Huffman, 2010; Kim, 2008; Luan & Sappathy, 2011). Luan and Sappathy (2011), for example, studied the effect of interaction by negotiation on L2 learners' vocabulary expansion, where 48 participants with the same L1 at an elementary school were assigned into 2 sets; an information-gap two-way interactive task was given to one group, and the traditional method or a one-way-input task was implemented in the second group. Their scores on both pre-test and post-test were compared and showed a significant difference, openly indicating that learners exposed to two-way interaction achieved higher vocabulary scores.

In another study, Kim (2008) investigated how collaborative and individualized tasks impacted L2 vocabulary learning by comparing learners' performance on a dictogloss task. The findings also proved that collaborative learning exerted a significant impact on participants' vocabulary learning. In an experimental study, Huffman (2010) investigated how participation in collaborative vocabulary learning impacted L2 learners' attitudes towards and motivation in developing one's English vocabulary scope. In her collaborative treatment group, she reported a significantly higher achievement of vocabulary knowledge in comparison with the individual treatment group. In an Iranian context, Fahiminia et al. (2013) tried to determine the impact of both individual and collaborative vocabulary learning via conducting a task-based activity; their findings revealed the significant effect of collaborative learning on the beliefs of EFL learners and their performance on tests of vocabulary. Due to the paucity of research on the effect of collaborative learning on Iranian EFL students' motivation and vocabulary learning in the high school context, the present study aimed at answering the following questions:

1. Does Collaborative learning enhance Iranian EFL students' motivation toward language learning?

2. Does Collaborative learning enhance Iranian EFL students' vocabulary learning?

3. Methodology

3.1. Design and Context of the Study

Based on the research objectives to explore how collaborative learning can impact the participants' vocabulary learning and motivation, a quasi-experimental design was adopted. The present study was conducted during the fall semester of 2017 in a senior high school in Azadshahr, Iran.

3.2. Participants

Two pre-university classes formed the focus of this study. By the national curriculum plan, these students met twice a week for the English lesson, which makes about three to four hours of exposure to English lessons each week. Class A (control group) and class B (experimental group) each consisted of 30 senior high school male students (locally known as pre-university classes). In line with the ethical dimension of research, the participants in both groups agreed to participate in the study by filling out the consent form.

3.3. Instruments

For data collection, two different instruments were administered: (1) the Standard Motivational Questionnaire (the Persian Version by Kouhsarian, 2013), representing the participants' motivation for language learning: and (2) the vocabulary tests, developed based on course content, measuring their vocabulary learning both before and after the course.

3.3.1. The Student Motivational State Questionnaire

To explore the participants' motivation for their English course, and to trace its changes, a questionnaire was given once at the beginning and once at the end of the term. The Persian Version of the Student Motivational State Questionnaire (Kouhsarian, 2013) had been prepared and validated to evaluate the participants' situation-specific motivational character as regards their L2 course. The items of the original questionnaire were adapted from earlier literature on motivation (Clément et al., 1994; Gardner, 1985; Guilloteaux, 2007; Noels et al., 2000). The questionnaire does not include items tapping into factors related to attitudinal and motivational issues (e.g. incentive values of English proficiency). Instead, it consists of

20 items on a 6-point scale: 1 (definitely not) and 6 (totally true) to assess the participants' (a) attitudes toward learners' present L2 course, (b) linguistic self-confidence, and (c) L2 classroom anxiety. This instrument designed and validated by Guilloteaux & Dörnyei (2008) was validated in its Persian form by Kouhsarian (2013). Therefore, the latter was used in the present study to collect relevant data about students' motivational dispositions in an Iranian high school context.

3.3.2. The Vocabulary Test

To assess the participants' knowledge of vocabulary, vocabulary test items were designed based on the course content. To assess their vocabulary knowledge and due to specific constraints, we were unable to use standard vocabulary tests and had to develop a researcher-made vocabulary test based on the participants' current L2 course.

The pretest was used to find an account of the participants' current vocabulary knowledge in both classes. Twenty multiple-choice items were chosen from the English Book 3 (Birjandi et al., 2013). All items were selected from their grade-12 final exam, which is believed to be a nationwide standard exam that is administered every year simultaneously to all grade-12 students. As such, the validity and reliability of the tests are thought to have already been given due consideration, and they were considered to be equally fairly measuring all participants' knowledge of vocabulary.

The posttest items were similarly collected from a different standard country-run exam, The National University Entrance Exam (NUEE) known as Konkoor in Iran. In other words, twenty different multiple-choice vocabulary items were selected to evaluate the students' vocabulary learning at the end of the course, i.e. after the end of both the traditional and collaborative instruction. It was simultaneously administered to students of class A, who were taught using a non-collaborative approach. Then the results of tests for both classes were analyzed and compared in SPSS.

3.4. Data Collection Procedure

After an introduction to the course in the first session, the teacher administered the pretest to both classes A and B. The results of this test provided us with a general view of both classes in terms of their vocabulary knowledge for later analysis and comparison at the end of the course.

After scoring, the teacher divided class B into 6 to 7 groups based on their pre-test scores; each group consisted of four to five participants. These groups were heterogeneous in their language knowledge, i.e. there were relatively proficient, average, and less proficient members in each group. Each group was carefully organized so that there was at least one top score, one average score, and two weaker scores in each group. Afterward, the teacher explained the norms and principles of collaborative techniques to groups of students in class B.

On the contrary, in Class A or the control group, the reading materials were taught in the routine traditional way; the teacher read the text and provided the meanings to the class, as is the case with almost all high schools in Iran. However, in class B, she provided hints about some key vocabulary in each paragraph, and then the students were allowed time to work together and reach a meaningful comprehension of the assigned paragraph, resorting to techniques such as brainstorming and group discussions. Finally, the teacher would ask for the perfect comprehension of the paragraph by calling students' names from a different group.

The collaborative procedure continued throughout the whole semester. At the end of the teaching process, the second vocabulary test was given to both classes to assess their vocabulary test performance. All the questions were from the first four chapters of English book 3 (Birjandi et al., 2013). The results of the posttest were then analyzed and compared with the pretest data, both within and between the two classes.

As for the motivation, the Motivational State Questionnaire was administered to both classes A and B once at the beginning, and once at the end of the term to assess any significant changes in their motivational disposition. The first motivational questionnaire provided us with data on how motivated both classes were at the beginning of the school term, and the second questionnaire provided us with information on students' motivation at the end of the term. The findings of these questionnaires indicated whether there was a positive relationship between learners' collaborative learning and motivation.

3.5. Data Analysis Procedure

The data for this study came from two sources: (1) the Motivational Status Questionnaire, and (2) the vocabulary tests. The obtained data were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics, including the independent samples *t*-test.

4. Results

4.1. Analysis of the Pretest Data

There was a slight difference between the pretest performance of the control group (A1) and experimental group (B1) as regards their motivation and vocabulary scores. To examine the significance of differences, Table 1 was drawn, which shows the results of the independent samples t-test.

Table 1.

T-test Analysis of the Pretest Performance of the Control group (A1) and Experimental Group (B1)

Variable	Mean	Std. error	t-value	DF	Sig.	Mean Difference
Motivation	52.8333	9.1466	-1.264	58	0.211	2.433
	55.2667	5.2518				
Vocabulary	10.8667	1.9428	-0.706	58	0.483	0.400
	11.2667	2.4202				

As observed, the *t*-test significance level in measuring the vocabulary and motivation distinction between the two groups exceeded the standard significance level (0.05) (see Table 1). Therefore, with a 95% confidence interval, it may be said that A1 and B1 are not significantly different groups as regards their vocabulary and motivation scores; in other words, at the beginning of the study, both groups were similar in their vocabulary and motivation scores.

4.2. Analysis of the Posttest Data

At the end of the experiment, both groups were given the second phase of the motivation questionnaire together with the vocabulary test. A significant difference between the control group (A2) and the experimental group (B2) was observed (p=0.01). To examine the significance of differences, Table 2 which depicts the results of independent samples t-test is presented.

Table 2.

T-test Analysis of Posttest Performance of the Control Group (A2) and Experimental Group (B2)

Variable	Mean	Std. error	*t*-value	Degree of Freedom	Sig.	Mean Difference
Motivation	54.2667	8.9208	-6.048	58	0.000	-10.700
	64.9667	3.7827				
Vocabulary	9.4333	1.7943	-7.417	58	0.000	-4.1666
	13.6000	2.4996				

As indicated in Table 2, the significance level of the *t*-test for equality of means in measuring the vocabulary and motivation distinction between the control group (A2) and the experimental group (B2) was less than the significance level (p=0.01). Therefore, with 99% certainty, it may be said that A2 and B2 are significantly distinct groups as regards their vocabulary and motivation scores. Therefore, both hypotheses of the study were rejected. In other words, collaborative learning enhanced the participants' motivation and vocabulary scores.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study revealed some of the benefits of collaborative learning. More specifically, the results demonstrated that collaborative learning in an EFL context contributed to active participation in language learning and resulted in higher scores of motivation and better performance on the vocabulary test. The primary finding stresses the effective role of collaborative learning on the participants' motivation; they felt less stressed and more confident, which is believed to be leading to enhanced motivation, which is in line with findings reported by Dong et al. (2022) and Mundelsee and Jurkowski (2021). Dissimilar findings, however, are observed in traditional and non-collaborative teaching styles, where there were no differences between highly-motivated and less-motivated learner groups in terms of their ideal second language selves (Papi & Abdollahzadeh, 2012); such indifference was observed and qualitatively explored by Teravainen-Goff (2022) who found that motivated learners were not likely to engage in language learning activities for reasons such as disengaging classroom tasks and competing preferences in their lives.

However, the results are in line with earlier studies (e.g. Huffman, 2010; Namaziandost et al., 2019; Van Leeuwen & Janssen, 2019), and is well supported by theories of collaborative learning. For instance, Dörnyei (2001) assumed that attitudes were likely to exert a directive influence on learners' behavior; from this perspective, collaborative attempts are fueled by ono-intrinsic motivations (those induced by the environment and peers) whereby group rewards are gained. Motivational theorists further rely on an intrinsic structure in rendering circumstances where group members are potentiated to achieve their academic objectives provided that these co-constructive attempts bear fruit in enhanced learning. Dörnyei (2001) explains that, in a collaboratively-oriented class, learners collaborate and the responsibility for the learning outcomes is divided onto the shoulders of each member of the group. In a similar vein, Jones and Issroff (2005) asserted that collaborative learning contributed to combining the individual and social aspects of the learning process, boosting learners' active participation and enhancing their improvement by constructing a strong motivational foundation, which consequently leads to better performance.

The second finding of this study provided further evidence of the effect of collaborative learning on vocabulary scores. Similarly, earlier literature provides us with similar findings, which echo the theoretical backbone behind the present study, i.e. the Vygotskyan (1978) perspective, which elucidates the causal-effect relationship between socializing and cognitive growth. Learning, from the sociocultural viewpoint, is a social phenomenon, instead of being an individualistic hobby, where the interaction in itself creates learning achievement (Lantolf & Thorne 2006). The finding is in line with Kim (2008), Kowal and Swain, (1994) Luan and Sappathy (2011), and Newton (2001), who reported a positive effect of collaborative learning on learners' vocabulary learning, as well as some others (Huffman, 2010; Namaziandost et al., 2019; Van Leeuwen & Janssen, 2019). Also, Shafiee and Khavaran (2017) reported that assigning students into groups provided them with more confidence in vocabulary learning and helped them lower their apprehension towards vocabulary learning. In line with Chalak and Kassaian (2010), it could be said that encouraging students to be actively involved and collaborate in the teaching-learning process can help them learn the new language more effectively.

6. Conclusion

In sum, the findings highlight the merits of cooperative learning and bear implications for teachers and teacher educators. Undeniably, as attested by Guilloteaux (2007), the motivational practices congruent with variant motivation levels are intertwined with L2 instruction. To be precise, engaging students in collaborative learning tasks exerts a paramount impact on improving learners' motivation and vocabulary test performance. The present study, however, had some limitations; the participants were all male learners recruited from one single high school. Advisably, the generalizability of the findings would be further enhanced if similar studies are conducted on larger samples of participants (both male and female) who are students of both secondary and tertiary education. In addition, qualitative interviews with teachers and learners can further help uncover the impact of collaborative learning on vocabulary learning and motivation.

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