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Group Work as a Contributing Factor for Language Use and Oral Fluency in EFL Classroom

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ABSTRACT

This study analyses how the cooperative learning strategies of discussions and interactions through group work could increase the speaking fluency of Pakistani students studying English as a foreign language to help them overcome their challenges. This study observed the contribution of group work as a cooperative learning strategy on oral fluency abilities in the context of English as a foreign language (EFL) instruction in Pakistan using a qualitative research technique. A variety of research methods, including interviews, observations, field notes, and reflective diaries, were used. Eight EFL students and four EFL lecturers were interviewed to get insight into their experiences with group work as cooperative learning strategy by using interactions and discussions and how it affected the growth of their oral fluency. The findings highlighted notable positive influence of group work activities on improving English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners' fluency in spoken language.

Keywords: Group work; Cooperative learning; Oral fluency; Learner centered; EFL

1. Introduction

Active participation from both the teachers and the students, as well as contact among the students themselves, is required throughout teaching and learning a foreign language. Teaching English as a foreign language (also known as EFL) emphasizes the need to veer away from a too systematic approach since it views language as a living resource

for communication. The greatest approach to learning a language is to put what you have learned into action. Effective English communication is a challenge for EFL students, nevertheless. This may be because it is difficult to acquire the necessary language abilities quickly, and there are few opportunities for in-depth communication.

Achieving oral fluency is the core of language learning. Richards and Renandya (2002) state that a large percentage of learners come to language classrooms with a dream and huge motivation for achieving fluency in oral communication. Contrary to this in Pakistan, students are hardly able to speak English fluently (Akhtar et al., 2019). In Pakistan, when students get registered in the university, they seem to lack speaking skill. They are unable to speak English language fluently, (Channa and Mannan, 2015). In public sector schools, English is mainly taught using the traditional teacher centred method of grammar-translation through Urdu and/or the local language in crowded and under- resourced classrooms (Arain et al., 2021; Shamim, 2011). Modern methods of interactive learner centred classrooms are only used in the elite schooling system where a small portion of powerful elite population learns English as a second language (ESL). For major portion of population (almost 90%) English is taught as a foreign language, EFL (Coleman, 2010) with teacher centred approach by giving students hardly any opportunity to practise (Dar et al., 2014). Due to this EFL learners rarely practise speaking skill.The usual teacher-centered style of teaching English in Pakistan hinders oral communication abilities, which results in students who perform extremely well in reading and writing but badly in speaking fluently. As a consequence of this, reading and writing skills are emphasized more than oral communication skills.

This study analyses how the cooperative learning strategies of discussions and interactions through group work could increase the speaking fluency of Pakistani students studying English as a foreign language to help them overcome their challenges. According to Gomleksiz (2007) and Kessler (1992), group work in the form of cooperative learning has developed into a learner-centered method emphasizing student-to-student contact, active engagement, and good results in language learning.

2. Materials and methods

This study observed the contribution of group work as a cooperative learning strategy on oral fluency abilities in the context of English as a foreign language (EFL) instruction using a qualitative research technique. Since qualitative research enables a thorough examination of participants' perceptions, experiences, viewpoints, and behaviours related to cooperative learning and oral fluency, it is advantageous for this study. The conceptual framework for this study is based on the learner-centred classroom, a method extracted from the social constructivist methodology in which there is a shift in the roles of teacher and learner (Saleem, Kausar and Deeba, 2021). The learner is no longer the passive recipient of language forms but he acts as creative language user who remains engaged in meaningful activities to communicate effectively (Murphy, 2000). The role of teacher is to be a facilitator who facilitates the teaching and learning process. Social Constructivism prioritises active student interaction in the classroom instead of relying on traditional professorial lectures. The lecturer encourages students to actively participate in the classroom to the best of their abilities. The instructor not only guides the students' actions but also enhances their grasp of the material. As discussed in the problem statement section, this shift in roles was practically very much required in the context of this study. So, this conceptual framework brings in learner centered classroom as a basis for teaching and learning process for oral language use and fluency. Based on this idea, groups of students were formed. These groups were formed using different techniques, the ultimate purpose of groups formation was to ensure student participation in class activities. In order to gather and analyse the perceptions and experiences of EFL lecturers and learners about group work, interviews were conducted to know about their opinions.

2.1 Setting and Participants

For this study, the researcher considered Sukkur IBA University, Sindh Pakistan as the research field. The students of National Talent Hunt Program (NTHP) were the population to get one class sample from. The reason for choosing this university was that it has been in the top five best business schools of Pakistan as per the ranking of Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan. The NTHP batch

is a batch which represents all four provinces of Pakistan. It is a batch which is fully funded through a scholarship and the students are taken from every corner of Pakistan on the basis of need cum merit basis from all government schools. So, it was helpful (in this study context) to get a good representation of the whole country. In this way, the results could also be generalised as far as the population is concerned.

The sampling was done by using the purposive sampling method. According to Patton (1990, p.169), "the logic and power of purposive sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for in depth study". Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance for the purpose of the research…". The sample size was decided as per the guidelines provided by different qualitative methodologists. Lopez and Whitehead (2013) prefer to have small samples. Creswell (2013) suggests of having 3–5 participants for a case study.

For student participants, out of 300 students of the batch and one class of forty students, ten students were selected by the method of purposive sampling (Brown, 2006, pp. 21–24). The students were chosen based on four main criteria:

1. They had their basic schooling from government schools.

2. They are rarely or never exposed to group work activities.

3. They were taught in teacher-centred classrooms.

4. They have got the least participation for practising speaking skills.

For lecturer participants, the participants were chosen from the zero semester (foundation semester). Four academics, including MA, the course lecturer whose class was observed, and three other lecturers who were only accessible for interviews, participated in this study. Each of the four lecturers has TEFL certification. However, their educational backgrounds and prior experience with the Zero semester teaching style varied by three to four years to provide the most realistic depiction of their perspectives. This addressed the question of whose "voice" is heard and diminished the effect of selective authorship (Scott and Usher, 1996). The qualitative component of the study enabled the researcher to investigate both the macro and micro parts of group work practice through the eyes of the participants while taking context into account.

2.2 Data Collection

In this study, a variety of data collection tools, including interviews, observations, field notes, and reflective diaries, were used. Eight EFL students and four EFL lecturers were interviewed to get insight into their experiences with group work as copertaive learning strategy by using interactions and discussions and how it affected the growth of their oral fluency. The students' thoughts, feelings, and attitudes on cooperative learning were captured in these interviews, which provided important qualitative data. Observations were made in the classroom as well during group work activities. Using these observations, the researcher could see firsthand how students engaged with one another, finished language exercises, and honed oral communication abilities in a group setting.

The instrument used for observing students' oral fluency in the classroom during group work activities was the Student Oral Language Observation Matrix (SOLOM) adapted from San Jose Area Bilingual Consortium. Originally, it observes a student's oral language in five domains: listening comprehension, vocabulary, fluency, grammar, and pronunciation. However, for the purpose of this study only the fluency part was used with some changes. Since this matrix was to be used to observe students' classroom speaking activities during group work, the 'everyday conversation' was dropped In addition to that, a Group Participation Observation Checklist was adapted from the resource unit of Community and Diversity, Interdisciplinary Early Years Multimedia (IEYM). The checklist was adapted with a few changes in terms of sequence and components. The original checklist components were presented as 'stays on task', 'listens to the group's ideas', 'participates in group activities', 'encourages group members' and 'uses other language for conversation'. On the other hand, the adapted version had 'uses English for conversation', 'uses native language for conversation', 'listens & responds to ideas', 'participates in tasks', 'stays on tasks' and 'makes task-relevant comments'.

Field notes captured in-depth observations, nonverbal cues, and contextual factors affecting students' fluency during collaborative learning sessions. Additionally, reflective journals allowed participants—especially EFL students—to consider their growth and learning experiences. In order to assess the student's achievement, the ideas and observations they made about the subject were written down in a journal.

By integrating different tools, the researcher gathered rich, comprehensive, and contextually embedded data, providing a full understanding of the effects of collaborative learning on oral fluency abilities. Due to the study's qualitative methodology, it was able to analyze the participants' experiences in great depth, providing insight into the potential benefits and drawbacks of including cooperative learning into EFL lessons.

Overall, the qualitative research technique and utilization of interviews, observations, field notes, and reflective diaries allowed for a thorough evaluation of the study question and gave insightful information about how collaborative learning contributes to developing oral fluency abilities in EFL students.

2.3 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. As per Maguire and Delahunt (2017), it is a process of identifying themes or patterns in the qualitative data. The purpose of thematic analysis was to find out themes in the data which were most important and could be used to address the research questions. The six step framework of Braun and Clarke (2006) has been used to analyse the data. The reason for using this framework was that being a clear and usable framework, it is the most influential in social sciences data analysis (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017).

The six step framework of Braun and Clarke thematic analysis as cited in Maguire and Delahunt, (2017) is as follows:

1. Become familiar with data
2. Generate initial codes
3. Search for themes
4. Review themes
5. Define themes
6. Write-up

All the collected data from interviews was transcribed through an online software, Otter. It is an AI based software which transcribes audio or video files. The license for the software was purchased and the interviews were transcribed on it. The transcribed interviews were proofread by listening to the audios again and again. In order to keep the data analysis process valid and reliable, the NVivo software was used. The license for this software was also purchased. After uploading the transcripts in the software, the interview transcripts were reviewed several times. The researcher kept on reading and going back and forth of the transcripts until the categories emerged. Then the categories were sectioned and coded. These coded transcript, field notes, and student reflective journals were compared and cross matched to check the relationship and consistency in the data. Then the themes were identified and then the themes were reviewed to have proper understanding of the data.

2.4 Ethical Consideration

In order to deal with any ethical issue during the data collection, the consent forms were designed and endorsed by the supervisor to get consent from all stakeholders involved in data collection process (Zhong et al., 2019). Designing the consent form before data collection demonstrates a proactive approach to addressing potential ethical issues.

Separate consent forms were used for all participants, administrative staff, teachers and students, as per the role they had to play during data collection stage. The use of separate consent forms for different participant groups (administrative staff, teachers, students) indicates a deliberate and transparent approach to ethical conduct. This shows that the researcher recognizes the distinct roles and potential risks faced by each group, and tailors the information and consent process accordingly. This transparency sets the tone for the entire research process, demonstrating that the researcher takes ethical considerations seriously. Having separate consent forms for different groups with varying levels of power (e.g., students vs. teachers) is particularly important in qualitative research, where power dynamics can be subtle but influential. Using distinct forms ensures that participants from less powerful groups do not feel pressured or obligated to participate due to concerns about potential consequences. All these consents were distributed among the participants and then were duly signed by them. Distributing and collecting signed consent forms provides tangible evidence that participants were informed and voluntarily agreed to participate. This documentation serves as a safeguard against potential accusations of coercion or lack of transparency. It also holds the researcher accountable for adhering to ethical principles throughout the research process.

3. Results

The main aim of this study was to explore the contribution of group work strategy in developing oral language use and fluency of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in Pakistani context. The research question which guided this study was:

How group work contributes to the oral fluency and language use of EFL learners?

Following are the findings of the study:

English lecturers in Pakistan are to remember that English can only be taught and learned in a classroom setting. The technique used significantly impacts language formation since the classroom is the primary setting in which learners can use the target language. Enhancing learners' oral fluency necessitates, first and foremost, overcoming these impediments. As a result, lecturers must provide students with a means of broadening their language-use options. The data findings establish group work as key to developing learners' oral fluency. All the study participants, lecturers, and learners, unanimously agreed and considered the contribution of group work as a major factor in developing and improving learners' oral fluency.

As per the perceptions and experiences of the lecturers, group work has a very positive effect on EFL learners' oral fluency. Indicating this improvement of students' MA explains that the students themselves feel very excited while sharing their feedback: "Oh I oh my god, I was here now I'm here". Further BS perceives that group work significantly improves students' oral fluency, "they will acquire fluency". RS, another study participant, perceives that the students "do improve their oral fluency in their group activities".

Highlighting the positive effect of group work on enhancing oral fluency of EFL learners BS shared his experiences by saying, "when it comes to fluency, group work really helped", RS considers that fluency can be improved by students when they are confident and have ideas to express themselves and he points out that these two things can only be developed properly in group work, he utters, "Sometimes we say confidence is the only element that helps in developing fluency," by adding, "So ideas could be the other factor that could help the student in developing fluency and that could be held and were developed in the group work activities." Whereas MA overall places group work as, "very important for speaking."

According to Harmer (1991), group work encourages students to participate in classroom activities and reduces their anxiety to improve their language fluency. Therefore, English learners should participate in as many group activities as possible in order to develop their fluency and other social skills. It should be highlighted that students of foreign languages should regularly and proficiently speak the language. Nunan (1991) concurred and said that the success of a language learner is measured by their ability to talk in the target language. Therefore, it is the job of English language lecturers to create an engaging environment where students can practice their language skills. In addition, students should be encouraged to speak English in class via speaking exercises and instructed in proper language usage.

Group Work has the positive effect on the oral fluency of the EFL learners. This finding makes group work as an important activity for language learning. Through group work, learners get many opportunities to practice the language. This practice makes the learners confident to participate frequently in language learning activities. It results in having a positive effect on oral fluency. This finding is consistence with many other previous studies (Kord and Mojavezi (2021); Loebens (2019); Phan (2018)).

The findings of another study by Haliwanda (2021) also are in consistence with the findings of the current study that for increasing oral fluency group work activities prove beneficial. He concludes in his study that communicative language teaching (CLT) is the most appropriate approach for developing speaking fluency among learners. Through group work activities, CLT enables learners to practice speaking, which develops learners' fluency.

In order to observe the real contribution of group work towards students' oral fluency, SOLOM (Student Oral Language Observation Matrix) was also used. The data from SOLOM clearly indicates the positive contribution of group work to learners' oral fluency. The improvement in the fluency of students can easily be observed in the scores of learners. The interviews of the learners at the start of the semester and at the end of semester were both observed through SOLOM. The positive difference in the learners' fluency can easily be observed.

Moreover, the observatory field notes also state that continuous practice of L2 language resulted in almost all students' oral fluency. During the observation of initial classes

it was observed that students were not that much fluent. But consistent practice of target language during the activities resulted in students' fluency. During initial weeks of the observations students seemed bit slow at speaking but during the last weeks they seemed fluent in their utterances.

4. Discussion

Results demonstrate that the study's findings significantly impacted participants' actions. In Pakistan, English lecturers play a crucial role in creating a classroom setting conducive to students developing their language skills and self-confidence when speaking English. Both lecturers and students believed that group work positively affected students' oral fluency and emerged as a vital part of this process. Students' oral fluency is improved by group work, according to the participants' reflections and accounts. The students' performance in the classroom was a direct result of the teachers' efforts, and they achieved their goals. The lecturers saw that students' fluency and confidence had increased during group activities and ascribed these improvements to the opportunities for language exercise and idea expression that group work offers.

The best way to learn about a language is to practise it. The findings emphasise the significance of lecturers encouraging a culture of frequent and skilled language usage in order to develop fluency. Concordance between the findings and past research lends credence to the validity and significance of the findings. Several studies, like those by Phan (2018), Kord and Mojavezi (2021), and Loebens (2019), have highlighted the benefits of group work for developing oral fluency and learning a new language. The Student Oral Language Observation Matrix (SOLOM) is used in the current study to objectively observe and assess the development of learners' fluency over time, lending credence to these earlier findings. SOLOM data demonstrates that students' oral fluency increases in group work.

The observatory field notes also reflected the students' improved oral fluency. The students' speech was less natural at initially, but they improved dramatically after engaging in frequent speaking practise in the target language during group activities. This lends credence to the claim that students gain more fluency in a language after engaging in frequent exercise and refinement in a group setting.

The findings of this study are important since they constitute the foundation for expanding knowledge about the most spoken language on the planet. English lecturers must understand the value of including group work activities into their classes to promote language fluency among students.

This study draws attention to the importance of group work as a powerful method for enhancing oral fluency in EFL learners. Group work activities positively benefit learners' self-assurance, language usage, and idea expression, all of which help increase learners' overall fluency. English lecturers in Pakistan, and those in similar settings, may want to consider including group work activities into their pedagogy to create a communicative and engaging learning environment that improves oral fluency among students.

5. Conclusions

In summary, this research employed a qualitative research methodology to examine the contribution of group work on the development of oral fluency skills in the field of English as a foreign language (EFL) instruction. The research methodology encompassed various data collection techniques, such as interviews, observations, field notes, and reflective diaries, which yielded a comprehensive and contextually embedded dataset. The findings highlighted notable positive influence of group work activities on improving English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners' fluency in spoken language. The participants, comprising both lecturers and students, collectively recognised the significant role that group work plays in enhancing and refining oral fluency. The study exhibited the significance of establishing a stimulating and nurturing classroom milieu in order to facilitate language acquisition and promote the articulation of ideas. Implementing regular and structured group activities resulted in significant enhancements in students' fluency levels over time. The results of this study are consistent with prior research, thereby strengthening the importance of cooperative activities in the acquisition of language skills. In educational settings such as Pakistan, English instructors should contemplate the integration of cooperative tasks by using group work as a means to foster learners' self-assurance and aptitude in English language proficiency. In conclusion, this study highlights the importance of group work activity as a fundamental strategy of cooperative learning for improving

oral fluency abilities in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. This research provides valuable knowledge that can inform language teaching and learning methodologies.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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