

Improving Speaking Skills in EFL Classes through Collaborative Learning

Abdulbagi Babiker*

Jazan University, Faculty of Science and Arts-Addair, K.S.A

Email: magaddam@yahoo.com

Abstract

Most methods of teaching depend on individual work as claimed by Ali in [1]. This is due to teachers' familiarity with traditional techniques as argued by Kailani [2] and Mudawi [3]. The current study aims at investigating improving speaking skills through collaborative learning. The study is to familiarize EFL teachers with collaborative learning techniques and ask them to encourage learners to practice these techniques. The study is to test six hypotheses and answer four questions. The study followed the analytical descriptive method. Data was collected and organized as a theoretical part. A questionnaire and check list are used as a practical part. Analysis arrived at the results that: EL teachers are not familiar with collaborative learning techniques, those teachers are affected by traditional methods used to teach them, students do not take group work seriously and these techniques lead to a noticeable progress in speaking skills. Consequently, the study recommends that: Collaborative learning should be part of teacher training program, teachers should train students to practice collaborative work and course designers should devote enough time for collaborative learning.

Key words: collaboration; collaborative learning; speaking; EFL.

1. Introduction

In their way to convey their message, FL teachers attempted many ways resulting in a variety of techniques. Harmer in [4] classified three categories: traditional, modern and progressive. One of those modern techniques is applying collaborative learning strategies in FL teaching. The idea of collaboration in LL is essentially concerned with the organization of institutionalized learning. To its advocates, learners participation is a pre-condition for effective learning [5].

* Corresponding author.

This is proved by the observation that when learners succeed in developing the ability to contribute in discussions, they don't only become better language learners but they also develop as more responsible and critical members of the community [6]. The major role of the teacher in collaborative learning is to develop a sense of contribution in his students so as to take an active role in their learning. But McGrath in [7] argues that developing this sense requires a well-trained teacher. So, the initial step is to pave the way for education and the pre-service and in-service preparation programs; through which teachers acquire the necessary and required experience to apply these techniques. This study is carried out to show how collaborative learning as a classroom technique enables EFL learners to improve Speaking skills. The study also aims at solving problems that confront learners and teachers when dealing with group activities in the classroom.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

It has been observed that group and pair work is ignored by many EFL teachers. The study is an attempt to draw EL teachers' attention, to use "collaborative learning" at different educational levels as a current concept and considered effective by its advocates.

1.2 Hypotheses

The purpose of this study is to test the following hypotheses:

1. Most of the English language teachers have no idea about effective collaborative learning.
2. Collaborative learning techniques are not regularly used in EFL classes.
3. There is not enough material for practicing group and pair work.
4. Most students do not enjoy working in groups and pairs .
5. Collaborative learning techniques lead to better performance in EFL classes.
6. Collaborative learning facilitates EFL learners' Oral interaction .

1.3 Limitation of the Study

The study is limited to university lecturers, students and EL teachers at different levels in Gezira Province - Sudan. The scope of the research is limited to familiarize EL teachers with collaborative learning techniques, encourage them to avoid traditionalism and develop group activities and techniques in ELT.

2. literature review

Before discussing the issue, data about related topics should be reviewed. Here Speaking and collaboration should be defined and analyzed.

2.1 Speaking

Generally, speaking is the productive skill that refers to production of speech sounds. In [8], Florecz states that speaking is the interactive process of constructing meanings that involve producing, receiving and processing information. Of all the four skill, language is what native speakers say and not what they ought to say. Knowing language connects with speaking as state in [9] That "speaking seems initially the most important: People who know a language are referred to as speakers of that language as if speaking included all other kinds of knowing and may if not most foreign language learners are primarily interested in learning to speak"

2.1.1 Speaking situations

According to Doff [10], there are three kinds of speaking situations in which we find ourselves: interactive, partially interactive and non-interactive". He explains the idea saying that : Interactive speaking situations include face- to face conversations and telephone calls, in which we are alternately listening and speaking, and in which we will have a chance to ask for clarification, repetition or slower speech from our conversation partner. Some speaking situations are partially interactive, such as when giving a speech to a live audience, where the conversation is that the audience does not interrupt the speech. The speaker nevertheless can see the audience and judge from the expression on their faces and body language whether or not he or she is being understood. Some few speaking situations may be totally non-interactive , such as when recording a speech for a radio broadcast.

2.1.2 Micro Skills

Like the others, speaking is more complicated skill than it seems at first and involves more than just pronouncing words. As micro-skills for speaking, Florenz in [7] recommends the speaker to train himself to:

1. pronounce the distinctive sounds of a language clearly enough so that people can distinguish them. This includes making tonal distinctions.
2. use stress and rhythmic patterns, and intonation patterns of a language clearly enough so that people can understand what is said.
3. use the correct form of words. This may mean, for example, changes in tense, case or gender.
4. put words together in correct word order.
5. use vocabulary appropriately.
6. use register or language variety that is appropriate to the situation and the relationship to the conversation partner.
7. make the discourse hang together so that people can follow.

2.1.3 Speaking Activities

Certain requirements are to be there when looking for better learning by using activities. To apply this for speaking, some suggestions are given [11]. These include the following:

1. learners talk a lot
2. participation is even.
3. motivation is high.
4. Language is of an acceptable level.

2.1.4 Problems with Speaking Activities

Joining learners in speaking activities involves many problems. These include:

1. Inhibition: learners worry about making mistakes in class, feel afraid of criticizing and appear shy.
2. Nothing to say: learners have no motive to express themselves and even to participate in speech as they are not interested and have nothing to say.
3. participation; only one participant can talk at a time if he is to be heard; and in a large group this seems that each one will have only little talking time or not at all.
4. Mother-tongue use: In classes where all, or a number of, the learners share the same mother-tongue, they may tend to use it; because it is easier .

2.1.5 Solving the Problems

To solve the above mentioned problems, Byrne in [11] suggested the following:

1. use group work. "this increase the sheer amount of learner talk going on in a limited period of time *and* also lowers the inhibition of learners".
2. base the activity on easy language:

The level of language needed for a discussion should be lower than that used in intensive language learning activities.

3. make a careful choice of a topic; "on the whole, the clearer the purpose of the discussion, the more motivated participant"
4. give some instructions or training in discussion skills.

5. keep students speaking the target language.

2.2 Collaboration

Three definitions for 'collaboration' are set in [12] as follows:

1. General: Cooperative arrangement in which two or more parties work jointly towards a common goal.
2. knowledge management (KM): effective method of transferring 'know how' among individuals, therefore critical to creating and sustaining a competitive advantage.
3. negotiations: conflict resolution strategy that uses both assertiveness and cooperation to seek solutions advantageous to all parties.

It is also defined as "working with each other to do a task and to achieve shared goals "[13].

2.2.1 Collaborative learning

It refers to the act of giving students an opportunity to work with others, so they do some work in groups or pairs. According to Cooper [14] "various names have been given to this form of teaching and there is some distinction among these: collaborative learning, cooperative learning, collective learning, team learning, learning communities, reciprocal learning"

2.2.2 Benefits of Using Collaborative Learning

Some benefits are expected when applying collaborative learning. Grath, in [7], show the benefits of collaborative learning in four categories :

1. social benefits as follows:
 - _ Collaborative learning helps develop social support system for learners.
 - _ It leads to build diversity understanding among students and staff.
 - _ It establishes a positive atmosphere for modeling and practicing cooperation.
 - _ It develops learning communities.
2. Psychological benefits as follows:
 - _ student-centered instruction increases student self esteem.
 - _ Cooperation reduces anxiety.

_ Collaborative learning develops positive attitudes towards teachers.

3. Academic benefits as follows:

_ It promotes critical thinking skills.

_ It involves students actively in the learning process.

_ It models appropriate problem solving techniques.

_it is helpful in motivating students in specific curriculum.

_ classroom results are improved.

4. Alternative assessment techniques

3. Methodology of the study

This study employs both the descriptive and experimental approaches. It introduces the population and study sample showing some of their characteristics and education .It also shows the instruments used for collecting the required data for this study .This is followed by testing validity and reliability of these instruments and data analysis techniques. The procedure of data collection is the usual procedure followed in questionnaires and checklists. The validity of this instrument is approved by 6 TEFL experts, and reliability is estimated by Pearson Correlation Formula. The questionnaire was administered to (460) EL teachers at different education levels. But only (300) respondents are picked out and used for data analysis (excluding alternatives, 1-2 years of experience and incomplete copies).

3.1 Population of the Study

The population of this study is EL teachers and learners at different levels of education in Sudan. The researcher chose Gezira Province as it is available to communicate with the subjects during observing student-teachers at teaching practice term. The study covers schools and colleges.

3.2 Sample

(300) EL teachers participate in this study. (160) respondents are graduates of education colleges (53.3%), (61) are graduates of education and arts colleges (23.3%) whereas (79) are graduates of arts. (23.4 %). (241) are male (83.3%), whereas 59 are female (16.7%). The age of the respondents ranges between (27-63) with an average age of 45 years. Their experience ranges between (3-36) with an average experience of 19.5 years.

For the purposes of this study, the participants fall within two groups: EL teachers and EL learners .The first group (teachers) is divided into two groups based on the level they teach .They include school teachers (230) and university lecturers (70).

The second group includes 2000 EL learners at different levels .1400 study at schools and 600 are university student's. From the intermediate schools, the researcher chose 450 students to participate in the current study, from the secondary schools they are 950. University students study either Arts (200) or Education (400)

3.3 Instruments

To collect data for the current study, two tools were used: A questionnaire and a checklist.

a. The questionnaire:

A questionnaire is a famous data collection tool with great advantages, so a restricted closed-form questionnaire of checking an item from a list of suggested responses is designed. In [15],Best and Kahn argued that: "The closed questionnaire is entirely satisfactory. It is easy to fill out, takes little time, keeps the respondent on the subject, is relatively objective and is fairly easy to tabulate and analyze".

It is of four sections . The first section concerned the personal information of the respondents, e.g. age; experience; sex and whether the respondent has an idea about collaborative learning. The second section investigated teacher's education at school and tertiary levels and the methods used to teach him/her English .The third section traced EL teacher's role during the lesson to explore his/her recent performance; method s/he uses in teaching English language .The Last section dealt with EL teachers evaluation and expectations of applying collaborative learning techniques to see if the process of group and pair work can lead to positive results in EFL classes .

b. Checklist:

To get closer to the fieldwork, a checklist was designed. It was mainly to study teaching and learning situation in the area i-e to test relative circumstances that facilitate or discourage applying collaborative learning techniques. The checklist items covered four areas: EL teachers, EL learners, English course books and schools environment.

Validity of the questionnaire:

To achieve content validity for the instruments used in the current study; the preliminary version was submitted to six experts in TEFL field for evaluation. They helped in the choice and refinement of the questions. They offered fruitful insights and comments. Their points were taken into consideration; some items were modified or omitted and others were added. So, the final version appears as shown below in "Appendix 1"

Reliability

Best and Kahn [15] declare that reliability or stability of a test is usually expressed as a correlation coefficient. This relates to:

1. Stability over time (test-retest) that the scores on a test will be highly correlated with scores on a second

administration of the test to the same subjects at a later date.

2. Stability over item samples that the scores on a test will be highly correlated with scores on an alternative form of the test.

The questionnaire was administered to a group of 28 EL teachers to respond to it. The score for each subject (X) and the mean score (\bar{x}) is (88.0), then the standard deviation is calculated ($S_{\sigma+}$) using the standard score formula:

$$S_x = \sqrt{\frac{\sum (X - \bar{x})^2}{N} = \frac{\sum (X - 88.0)^2}{28} = \frac{194}{28} = 2.63}$$

After a month, the questionnaire was reorganized in an alternative form: the arrangement of the multiple choices in sections A; B; and C are changed, and the five point-scale table in section C. ranges from not at all (5) to every lesson (1); and in section D it ranges from strongly disagree (5) to strongly agree (1). Then it is administered to the same group (N). The score for each subject (Y) and the mean score (\bar{y}) was (86.0), then the standard deviation is calculated (S_x) using the standard score formula (Kiess: 2002:381):

$$S_y = \sqrt{\frac{\sum (Y - \bar{y})^2}{N} = \frac{\sum (Y - 86.0)^2}{28} = \frac{255}{28} = 3.02}$$

The standard deviation of the first responses on the questionnaire (S_x) is correlated with the standard deviation of responses on the second administration (S_y). The correlation coefficient (r) is calculated using Pearson Correlation Formula, by converting (X) scores and (Y) scores into standard scores (\check{X}), (\check{Y}) (Table 3.8):

$$\check{X} = \frac{X - \bar{x}}{S_x} = \frac{X - 88}{2.63} = 6.01$$

$$S_x = 2.63$$

$$\check{Y} = \frac{Y - \bar{y}}{S_y} = \frac{Y - 86}{3.02} = 4.08$$

$$S_y = 3.02$$

$$r = \frac{\sum (\check{X} \times \check{Y})}{N} = \frac{+24.52}{28} = 0.875 = 0.88$$

$$N = 28$$

The correlation coefficient is (0.88). Kiess (2002:369) , the score approximates to (+1), it indicates that the correlation between the two variables is strong. Results indicate that the questionnaire is valid and reliable.

As far as the checklist is concerned, they argue that observation is not enough to study deeply and evaluate teaching and learning situation .So they suggested supporting its items by extra questions for learners and teachers as shown in" Appendix 11":

3.4 Data Analysis Techniques

Normally, in a questionnaire, responses are classified into categories according to the nature of item and the hypotheses discussed by the research. In the current study the responses are classified and coded into numerical data. The data are tabulated analyzed. The same is done for the items of the checklist.

4. Results

Analysis of the questionnaire questions and check list items show the results of the study. The following section provides analysis of the responses to the questionnaire questions and observations based on the checklist items.

4.1 Analysis of the questionnaire

Question One :(Have you any idea about collaborative learning techniques?)

The result shows that (64.9%) have no idea about the term. On the other hand (79.2%) of the university lecturers (57 out of 70) have some idea about the term. This result proves that school teachers lack exposure to the innovative in the field of FLT. **Question Two:** (Have you attended seminars or workshops on "collaborative learning?")

The result proves that the majority of the target group (87.7%) hasn't attended a seminar/workshop on collaborative learning techniques.

Question Three: What were the methods used to teach you English?

This question investigates EL teacher's education at schools and tertiary levels. It explores the methods used to teach the subjects EL The results show that the traditional methods had been dominant when respondents were taught EL at schools and colleges that (69.6%) of the respondents were taught EL in traditional methods.

Question Four: (How do you practice activities during the lesson?)

The results prove that most of the respondents (73.8%) were practicing activities traditionally; individually and as a class during their study at school and tertiary level.

Question Five :(Which method do you use to teach EL?)

According to the classification of Kailani in [2], the methods are classified into three categories: the traditional, the modern and the progressive methods. The results show that EL teachers are affected by the methods that were used to teach them EL during their study at schools and tertiary levels. Most of the respondents (62.9%) use the old traditional methods in ELT.

Question Six : (Which techniques do you use with students for language practice?)

By referring to [16], the techniques are classified into two categories: traditional techniques; modern and progressive techniques. The result proves that most of the respondents (64.7%) use the traditional techniques to practice various pieces of the EL.

Question Seven: (How often do you use collaborative learning techniques?)

Nearly all participants respond to this question (294). The missed number is (6) school teachers. The question is accompanied by five alternatives, five - points scale, scored from (5: every lesson); (4: weekly); (3: every 2 week); (2: every month) to (1: not at all). The result shows that collaborative learning techniques are used every lesson by only (10.8%) of the respondents, whereas (30.8%) show that they rarely use the progressive techniques. It is apparent that the respondents are in favor of the traditional techniques.

Section Two

Here the focus is on testing the results of applying collaborative learning. So responses for (7) questions are analyzed.

Question One:

(Has collaborative learning a positive influence on students' standards?)

Of 300 subjects, 264 say "Yes". This represents 89% of the total. The remaining 36 say "to some extent". This is 11%. No one rejects the idea. So this is a good evidence that the techniques are helpful.

Question Two:

(Do group discussions and assignments help students be communicative?)

The responses to this question show the following results: 264(88%) answer 'yes', 36 (12%) say 'to some extent' and no one says 'no'.

Question Three:

(Does working in groups facilitate producing fluent and accurate utterances?)

When the targeted subjects received the copy, their responses were as follows: 195 (65%) say 'yes', 93(31%)

say 'to some extent' and 12 (4%) say 'no'.

4.2 Analysis of the checklist

Item One: (Do EL teachers use collaborative learning techniques regularly?)

The researcher arranged visits to some colleges and schools to see whether the techniques are used regularly or not. The results show that even those who use the techniques tend to use it once a week.

Based on this, the researcher observed that group and pair work take 16.6% of the whole time.

Item Two: (Do course books provide enough materials for pair and group work?).

By checking course books for all levels, the researcher observed that group and pair work always come at the end of units. There is no material for practicing such techniques during each lesson.

Item Three: (Are there suitable classes for group and pair work?)

In normal classes, it seems impractical to use groups. So, the researcher attempted to study the nature of rooms to see if they can facilitate collaborative learning. Visiting schools and colleges, the researcher observed that most of the rooms are not large enough for group work. Some of them are even uncomfortable for individual work. In addition to that, time tables do not provide enough time for group work.

Item Four: (Do learners enjoy working in groups?)

The researcher observed that most students don't feel comfortable when exposed to group work. This represents about 84% of learners where this technique is applied. The researcher observed that those students seem to be afraid of participating in such a job. Their faces show that they are dealing with something absolutely strange.

The above observation is supported by the responses to some related questions. The researcher designed four questions and distributed them among 2000 students. The results were as follows:

Question One: (Do you like your teacher to explain everything?)

This question is to discover if the learner tends to depend on his teacher or he is ready to take part in learning process. The responses show that 1860 learners (98%) say "yes", 29(0.15) say "to some extent and only 11 of them(0.05) say "no".

Question Two: (Do you like to learn by conversation?)

The responses show that 1600learners (80%) answer "No",264 of them (13.2%) say "to some extent" and only 136 (6.8%) say "yes".

Question Three: (Do you prefer to talk to friends in English?)

Learners usually discuss many topics and show their opinions using their mother tongue. So the aim of the above question is to test whether learners can enrich group discussions. The responses to this question show the following results: 542 students (27.1%) say "Yes", 151(7.5%) say "to some extent" and 1307(65.4%) say "no".

Item Four: (Do you like your teacher to give you problems to work on in groups?)

The philosophy behind that question is that: Learners can join groups effectively if they are ready to work on problems and solve exercises.

Studying the responses to this question, the forms show that 1382 learners (69.2%) say "no", 407 (20.3%) say "No" and 211(10.5%) say "to some extent".

5. Discussion of the Results

EL teachers Knowledge of collaborative learning techniques:

The results prove that scarcely any of the target group (12.3%) has got the opportunity of attending a seminar on collaborative learning techniques. Research on teacher training confirms that periodical seminars; symposium and conferences on ELT can treat deficiencies in teacher education. They are considered as complementary to what the teacher study at colleges. Moreover they contribute in qualifying teachers who are graduates of other specializations.

EL teachers Education

The results show that only (22.9%) of the target group were taught EL in modern methods and hardly any of them (7.4%) were taught it in progressive methods. The results show that only (26.2%) practice the activities in pairs and groups.

Subjects Recent Practice of EL

The results show that (32.1%) use the modern methods in their ELT practice and only (5.0%) use the progressive methods. It is proved that (23.5%) adopt the modern EL teacher role and make (20.5%) of their students take the modern role. Hardly any of the respondents (7.6%) act the EL teacher progressive role and make (3.0%) of their students act. The results prove that only (24.5%) use the modern techniques to evaluate students' performance and few (13.6%) use the progressive techniques. This result can be interpreted by referring to Solano-Flores and Trumbull (2003) study. They argued that practices in the evaluating of EL learners are often driven by policies rather than by theory.

Effectiveness of Collaborative Learning:

It seems that all EL learners agree on the effectiveness of collaborative learning techniques. The results show

that 89% of EL learners consider these techniques as useful in EFL classes. Most teachers say that the positive influence of these techniques are clear in students' works. This proves that these techniques are helpful in EFL classes. The results show that most EL teachers think that group work helps enrich thinking in English. Moreover, EL learners tend to master all writing process while joining their groups and working on various problems. Collaborative learning strategies are also effective in the field of oral interaction. The results prove that none of the subjects reject the idea that collaborative learning techniques help students be communicative and most EL teachers think that collaborative learning strategies help EL learners be fluent and produce accurate utterances. This is due to continuous discussions, exchanging experiences and attempting to correct errors within groups.

Teaching Environment and Materials:

Visits to colleges and schools show that the buildings are not suitable for group work. Moreover, timetables devote no time for practicing group work. As a result, it is concluded that teaching environment doesn't help apply collaborative techniques. Moreover, the researcher observed that there is no enough material for collaborative learning. What is really found, is just a little practice at the end of units.

Students' attitudes towards collaborative learning :

The results show that most EL learners (98%) like the teacher to explain everything, the majority of the sample doesn't like learning by conversation and participate in oral interaction. As a result, they don't enjoy groups and pairs. It is also clear that most learners (65%) don't like to talk to friends in English. So, 69% Of the sample don't like their teachers to give them problems to work on as groups and pairs, hence, they are not expected to participate effectively in groups.

The above results show that most learners don't enjoy working in groups. However, it is the teacher's responsibility to motivate learners and encourage them to participate in such a useful method of teaching. Their attitudes should be interpreted in their practice but they mayn't intend to lead a change as change needs plans and arrangements.

6. Findings

The responses obtained from the questionnaire and the check list have shown the following findings:

- 1- EL teachers are not familiar with collaborative learning techniques during their study or training.
- 2- Those teachers are affected by the experience of ELT at their schools and tertiary education. They practice the teacher traditional role. So incorporating "collaborative learning strategies" into the methodology courses should be considered.
- 3- EL teacher education and lack of opportunities to interact; locally or internationally in order to exchange current conceptions in the field of FLT make EL teachers apply the traditional methods; techniques

and activities in their practice, consequently they may not be able to enrich students' knowledge with the EL skills and elements.

4-Collaborative learning techniques lead to noticeable progress in oral and verbal interaction in EFL classes.

5-Students don't take working in groups seriously.

6-Most students don't enjoy working in groups and lack motivation to do so.

7-coursebooks don't provide enough material for group work and EL teachers don't take the issue as a key to FL teachers.

7. Recommendations

The study introduces some recommendations. It is hoped that they are applicable in the field of ELT. These are:

1- The concepts of collaboration should be in the center of both pre-service and in-service FL teacher education programs.

2- FL teacher education programs should be restructured by extending student teaching; integrating field experience components into their coursework and developing collaborative relationship between teacher education departments and other colleges and departments.

3- The aim of FL teacher training courses should be to develop teachers who are researchers not just technicians and deliverers of the syllabus. So teaching methodology can reflect curriculum goals, and teachers' experience in turn contributes to the process of curriculum renewal.

4-EL teachers should motivate their students and show patience in order to train them and improve language production and use.

5-Syllabus designers have to devote enough time for collaboration supplemented with a variety of activities for practicing group and pair work.

Appendix 1

Interview Questions

Section One : Personal information

1-Name (optional)3age

2-Nationality :4sex

13-how often do you use collaborative learning techniques?

a. very lesson b. weekly c. every2weeks. e

a. very month e. not at all e

Section Four: Evaluation of collaborative learning

14-Has collaborative learning a positive influence on students' performance?

a. es b. to some extent c. no y

15-Do group discussions and activities help students be communicative?

a. es b. to some extent c. no y

16-Does working in groups facilitate producing fluent and accurate utterances?

a. es b. to some extent c. no y

Appendix 11

Check list items

1.Do teachers use collaborative learning techniques regularly?

a. yes b. to some extent c. no

2-Do course books provide enough material for group and pair work?

a. es b .to some extent c. no y

3-Are there suitable classes for group and pair work?

a. es b. to some extent c, no y

4-Do learners enjoy working in groups?

a. y
es b. to some extent c. no

(b) supplementary questionnaire for EL learners:

1-Do you like your teacher to explain everything?

a.yes b. to some extent c. no

2-Do you like to learn by conversation?

a. y
es b. to some extent c. no

3-Do you prefer to talk to friends in English?

a. y
es b. to some extent c. no

4-Do you like your teacher to give you problems to work on?

a, yes b. to some extent c. no

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