Shahid Rajaee Teacher Training University

Faculty of Humanities

The Effect of Group Work on Learners' Willingness to Communicate in EFL

By: Elahe Jahanshahi

Under Supervision of Dr. Maryam Meshkat

&

Co-Supervision of Dr. Reza Nejati

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Studies Office in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in

Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL)

March, 2013

In The Name of God

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Dedication

To my beloved mom and sisters, for their lifelong encouragement and support

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Abstract

English, which is defined as an international language, is used by more than one and a half billion people (Strevens, 1992) as a first, second, or foreign language for communication purposes. Consequently, the purpose of teaching English has shifted from the mastery of structure to the ability to use the language for communicative purposes. Thus, the issues of whether learners would communicate in English when they had the chance and what would affect their willingness to communicate gain importance. The objective of the present study was to examine whether college students who were learning English as a foreign language in the Iranian context were willing to communicate when they had an opportunity. The present study utilized a quantitative data collection and analysis procedures. The appropriate method was quasi-experimental design and data were analyzed through t-test. The total participants in this study were 80 English students (either translation or teaching) in South Tehran branch of Islamic Azad University. The Willingness to Communicate questionnaire was distributed among the participants before and after the treatment (Group Work). The results showed that Group activities had a significant effect on students' willingness to communicate and revealed that learners were willing to communicate in English. Participants preferred using group work; in such relax and calm atmosphere and enjoyable way to solve problems and attend classes they were more willing to communicate. Creating environments for learners to communicate in English inside and outside the classroom and via internet and synchronous chat would enhance learners willing to communicate.

Key words: Group work, WTC, Communicate in English, synchronous chat.

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Chapter I:

Introduction

1.1. Introduction

Foreign language learning and teaching has been always a controversial issue for linguists and scholars. Acquisition of an L1 results in full mastery of the language, learners of EFL—even after many years of EFL exposure—differ widely in level of attainment. This issue is the same for language products of the learners, speaking and writing. The learners are different in many ways in foreign language learning, they may vary from being introvert to extrovert when speaking is concerned. There are many processes in the foreign language learning one of which is teaching. Through teaching some instructors come to the conclusion that there are students who are not willing to communicate in the second language. Willingness to communicate is the tendency to talk to others which is a psychological issue. This tendency is low in some people and may decrease when the learner is in a foreign language setting (MacIntyre, 2009).

Foreign language instructors usually use different ways to increase their students' willingness to communicate in their classrooms. Using other learners (e.g. putting them into groups) to increase the unwilling students' tendency to talk to others is one of the ways which help the reticent students to overcome their problem in communication. There was a big question mark in the researcher's mind to know how willingness to communicate (WTC) in a foreign language (EFL) can dynamically emerge and fluctuate during group work in a class. According to Peng (2007), willingness to communicate

(WTC) has been an important concept in explaining first language (L1) and foreign language (EFL) communication. With increasing emphasis on communication as an essential part of EFL learning and instruction, WTC has also been proposed as one of the key concepts in EFL learning and instruction (Su-Ja Kang, 2004). Zakahi and McCroskey (1989) believed that WTC is very important because of the role of interaction in language development. Since language development can occur through interaction, then it can be concluded that more interaction leads to more language development and learning. Under this assumption, it is reasonable to argue that WTC is very important in EFL and worthy of attention when we are talking about Iranian students learning English.

Due to the fact that it can be improved through instruction, WTC needs to be emphasized in EFL pedagogy. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to examine how WTC emerges through the role of group work.

MacIntyre et al., (1998, 2003) have suggested that generating WTC is a crucial component of modern language instruction.

Olsen and Kagan (1992, p. 8) said "willing to communicate is part of becoming fluent in a second language, which often is the ultimate goal of EFL learners". So it is very important to examine this issue from different perspectives and to try to find out how we can extract it from our students. It gains more importance when our participants are Iranian students.

It seems that seeking opportunities to communicate would greatly increase the chances for inter-cultural contact, EFL communication practice (Larsen-Freeman, 2007) and comprehensible input (Krashen, 2003).

Most teachers believe that students in EFL classrooms and outside the classroom frequently have opportunities to speak. They complain about the avoidance of their students to speak until they would be asked to talk.

1.2. Statement of the problem

MacIntyre et al. (2003) believes "Despite the emphasis on communication in modern language pedagogy and the well accepted view that learners require practice in speaking in order to learn, some language learners habitually choose to remain silent" (cited in MacIntyre ,2009). This is the case in the Iranian context too; unfortunately, lots of students who prefer to be silent in FL situations are observed, especially when speaking is concerned. In the domain of foreign language learning, there is a concern for students who study the language but remain reluctant to use it. Each and every one of us can name many learners who are reticent although they know how to speak in the second language (in our case English). It is not of surprise that language teachers wish to have language students who seek out EFL communication by themselves; those students who are willing to communicate when the opportunities arise, whether inside or outside the classroom.

The present study tried to examine the effect of group work on Iranian learners' willingness to communicate in foreign language acquisition settings. It has been done by the use of Cooperative Language Learning (CLL) approach to teaching. Group learning activity organized so that learning is dependent on the socially structured exchange of information between learners in groups and in which each learner is held accountable for his or her own learning and is motivated to increase the learning of

others (Olsen and Kagan, 1992, p. 8). On the other hand, students will also use communicative language learning in order to be able to use English (as a foreign language). Group work can help both the instructor and learners to have a setting similar to real community for teaching and learning. The group gives them a feeling like being in a small society in which they have to adjust themselves to others and use the second language to achieve their communicational goals. Long and Porter (1985) found six benefits of group work for L2 learning compared to teacher-fronted whole class instruction: (a) significantly more opportunities to individually practice the target language, (b) a wider range of language functions practiced in group work, (c) no difference in the accuracy level of the students' utterances, (d) more peer-peer error correction and completion of utterances, (e) more frequent negotiation for meaning, and (f) an increased amount of talk and negotiation work.

1.3. Significance of the Study

Communicative competence as the manifestation of language competence is important for both teachers and students. The great emphasis is speaking that help learners to communicate inside and outside the classroom.

The current communicative approaches emphasize the importance of learners to develop their competence and WTC in the FL via performance and using EFL in oral tasks in small groups. These approaches to instruction are based on the premise that learners' competence in the EFL is developed via performance and are supported by the dominant theories of second language acquisition (Long, 1996). There is also another important point which signifies this work: we all have been in situations in which it is seen that many competent EFL learners tend to avoid EFL communication. If this is the

case, EFL learners with high communicative competence may not utilize their opportunities to learn language through authentic communication. One of the most important reasons can be this fact that there are many factors which cause students avoid talking in public and this study can help the researchers to find out the factors. This thesis seeks out to remove the fear of speaking in public by using group work in order to make students feel secure in larger contexts like the second language community and this is useful for instructors.

1.4. Research Question and Hypothesis

In order to deepen our understanding of WTC by filling the gap in the literature and to provide pedagogical implications, this study examines the following research question:

Does group work have any influence on learners' willingness to communicate in EFL?

The researcher has put forward the following null hypothesis:

Group work has not any influence on learners' willingness to communicate in EFL.

1.5. Definition of Key Terms

This section is devoted to the definitions of the keywords which are used in the work.

Group work: In his seminal text on learning in groups, Jaques (2001) defines the notion of a ‘‘group’’ as having at least some of the following key attributes: (1) Collective perception: the conscious recognition of the existence of the group by its constituent members; (2) Needs: the recognition that a group will potentially be able to help individuals within a group; (3) Shared aims: the recognition of aims or incentives that motivates group members; (4) Interdependence: the relationships between the members within a group depend on the contributions and behaviors of its constituent members; (5) Social organization: there is an intrinsic order to a group which encompasses various rules and power relations; (6) Interaction: the potential of communicative exchange must occur within groups even if they may not be geographically in the same place (thus allowing for ‘‘virtual’’ groups); (7) Cohesiveness: Members of a group should want the group continue and have a desire to contribute to, and benefit from it; (8) Membership: A group can be defined by the extent of its membership relations. There must be a sense of exchange in a group. Thus, ‘‘two or more people interacting for longer than a few minutes constitute a group’’ (Jaques, 2001, pp. 1–2).

Operational meaning: In the present study group work refers to cooperative tasks and practices, in which a group of people including two or more students tried to do the task, solve a problem and complete an activity. Group work contained different activities all of which aimed to increase willingness to communicate in students. The Pair and Group work checklist used to define the group work’s framework including thirteen points.

Willingness to Communicate (WTC): Willingness to communicate (WTC) was first conceptualized as the probability of engaging in communication when free to choose to do so (McCroskey & Baer, 1985).

Operational meaning: What the researcher meant by willingness to communicate in her work is the extent to which the students tend to initiate or participate in communications in groups with their classmates and the instructor. Checking the changes of learners' behavior, the Willingness to Communicate questionnaire used both as pretest and post-test.

1.6. Limitations and Delimitations of the Study

In any kind of research there are definitely some variables that may not be controlled. This research is not an exception. The present study has the following limitations and delimitations:

Limitation: It was not possible to make sure that the learners answered the questions of the WTC questionnaire honestly. This problem is completely out of control of the researcher. Then it's the limitation of this study.

Also it was not possible to know how different levels such as elementary, intermediate and advanced influence learners' WTC because of discarded TOEFL tests.

Delimitation: The researcher focused only on one university in Tehran because of the time limit. Then the delimitation is related to the number of participants, universities and cities.