A Collaborative Approach to Autonomy: 
Does it Improve EFL Learners’ Oral Proficiency?

Mona Khabiri and Morvarid Lavasani

1Islamic Azad University, Central Tehran Branch, Tehran, Iran 
2Islamic Azad University, Science and Research Branch Tehran, Iran

Abstract: This article argues in favor of a collaborative approach to autonomy based on social constructivism and reports the effect of such an approach on EFL learners’ oral proficiency. A sample of 80 male and female participants was selected through random clustering method from the pre- and intermediate levels of an English language school. Based on their scores on Preliminary English Test (PET) and an oral interview, a homogenized sample of 48 participants was selected as intermediate EFL learners and randomly divided into an experimental and a control group. The experimental group received the treatment which focused on practicing autonomy collaboratively while performing speaking tasks; however, in the control group speaking was practiced without collaborative autonomy. The results of the oral interview after the treatment period were analyzed through Man-Whitney test which indicated a statistically significant difference between the mean rank of the experimental and control groups on the oral proficiency posttest. This indicated that a collaborative approach in practicing autonomy had a significant impact on EFL learners’ oral proficiency. The paper also describes in full the procedure of the collaborative practice of autonomy in the experimental group.

Key words: Learner autonomy • Collaborative learning • Oral proficiency • EFL learners • Social constructivism • Zone of proximal development

INTRODUCTION

The theory and practice of language teaching is concerned with promoting beneficial language learning habits. Therefore, researchers in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) have focused on investigating variables that affect language learning and the different findings obtained in the field have contributed to the better understanding of the learners’ needs and the processes they undergo in order to deal with the challenge of exploring and learning a new means of communication.

Nevertheless, many language teachers may still feel disappointed by the outcome of their students’ learning compared to the amount of endeavor they invest in their classes. This problem may be more realizable in the case of learning English in an EFL context (compared to an ESL one) where the learners have much fewer opportunities for communicating in the target language especially with the native speakers. Consequently, to overcome the disconcerting hurdle of attaining effective learning outcomes, the need for learner’s independence has come into realization in the field of language teaching.

In other words, it seems that encouraging learner’s autonomy is being increasingly recognized as a beneficial practice to promote language learning in general [1]. However, one problem in certain EFL contexts might be the fact that autonomy is very closely related to the issue of culture. Reference [2] believes that promoting learner autonomy is narrowly linked to the context in which autonomy is exercised and various cultures have different views regarding learner autonomy. Culture relates learners to two opposite contexts for fostering autonomy, one sociocultural and the other learning in isolation. In some cultures learner autonomy is individual learning, while sociocultural view believes in collaboration and interaction of learners with each other and with the teacher. Asians seem to be more dependent on the
teacher and as Benson [3] (p. 25) also reports in reviewing the research findings, they tend to prefer group-oriented approaches to autonomy.

As a result, the researchers of this study felt the need to empirically investigate their intuitive realization of the benefits of implementing a collaborative approach to learner autonomy among their learners for the improvement of their oral proficiency.

Autonomy: One of the earliest and most frequently cited definitions of autonomy is by reference [4] (p. 42) as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning”. Later definitions conceptualized autonomy as a process or strategy that develops gradually in the learner such as the one by Little [5] stating that “autonomy in language learning depends on the development and exercise of a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision making and independent action” (p. 4) or the one by Pennycook [6] (p.45), in which autonomy is defined as “developing strategies, techniques, or materials in order to promote individual self-development”. Conversely, Benson [7] argues that autonomy is a pedagogical ideology in favor of teaching that ultimately turns control of the task of learning over the learners.

A Collaborative Approach to Learner Autonomy: Autonomy has a history of approximately three decades. According to Gremmo and Riley [8], early pedagogical experiments related to autonomy were inspired by humanistic approaches focusing on self-directed learning and led to the development of self-access centers and learners’ training. Later through the 1970s and 1980s, the concept of autonomy was closely coupled with the concept of individualization, meaning that teachers would prepare the materials but learners would work their ways at their own pace [7].

In 1990s, researchers realized that learners who decided, or were forced by circumstances, to study languages in isolation from teachers and other learners, would not necessarily develop autonomy. Therefore, gradually the concept of autonomy as being a feature of the learner (for example [4, 9] moved toward a conception that considered autonomy a feature of the learning situation [5]. And based on the important role socialization plays in the learning situation, [10] (p. 117), talked about the notion of social autonomy asserting that, “autonomy resides in the social worlds of the students, which they bring with them”. Moreover, [11] (p. 210) argued that collaboration is essential to the "development of autonomy as a psychological capacity”, stating that the development of learner autonomy depends on “the development of an internalization of a capacity to participate fully and critically in social interactions”.

It was with the similar ideology and conception that [3] described autonomy to be interdependent as well as independent learning, though admitting that it is at the same time taking control of one’s own learning. Such an ideology seems to be closely related to the social constructivists’ perspectives toward learning. For example, [12] zone of proximal development (ZPD) and the notion of the distance between actual and potential development as determined by independent problem solving and assisted problem solving respectively, seem to be linked to the conception of autonomy by reference [3]. Learners need to take part in social interaction and collaboratively negotiate and perform each task with their peers. The latter corresponds to the interdependent aspect of autonomy. That is to say, the gap between dependent and independent learning is bridged by interdependent learning. Consequently, the perspective that is suggested here is also cyclical meaning that the development and internalization of autonomy within learners will consecutively move from interdependence to independence at each ZPD stage and when moving to the next stage the learner will again move from interdependence to independence but at a higher level.

However, note has to be taken that teachers play a supportive and facilitative role in the autonomous learning by encouraging students to take an active part in decision-making and problem solving and offering them guidance [13] (p. 87). Therefore, according to [14] (p. 69), teachers are still very much involved in assisting the learners with their learning and learners can choose to be more or less independent at different stages along the process and can be encouraged to reflect on their learning and ways to improve it.

This study examines whether or not a collaborative approach to autonomy has any significant effect on the oral proficiency of Iranian intermediate EFL learners.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In order to fulfill the purpose of the study, 48 intermediate students who were homogenized based on a Preliminary English Test (PET) and an oral interview and were randomly assigned into two groups (a control and an experimental group), took part in this study. The instruments that were utilized in this study can be divided into two main categories: instructional tasks and tests.
Instructional Tasks: According to [7] (p.1), fostering autonomy does not imply any particular approach to practice and in principle, any practice that encourages and enables learners to take control of any aspect of their learning can be considered as a means of promoting autonomy. Therefore, in the selection of tasks for the experimental group the focus was on tasks that encouraged learner autonomy and that also led to improvement of oral proficiency. Four main instructional tasks were used for the experimental group to collaboratively practice autonomy and the same tasks were implemented in the control group but they were entirely guided and controlled by the teacher thus, the learners did not experience the collaborative learner autonomy.

Conversation with Gaps: According to [15], one way of gaining control over speaking task is to give students the conversation with gaps, but in conditions where other-regulation is progressively relinquished. One simple but effective way of doing this is through the use of dialogues. There are two conversations in each unit of Interchange, but only one appears in the book and the other is only available in the teacher’s guide. Most of the time, the second conversation is the continuation of the first one. The researchers typed the conversation that the learners did not have in their books and inserted many gaps in the conversation. Then, the scene was set, for instance, by the teacher’s explanation about the topic, the setting and the sequence of the events in the conversation.

Afterward, the teacher (who was one of the researchers) asked the participants to form pairs or groups and the students themselves chose their partners. The students would then negotiate with each other to fill the gaps and members of one pair would review the completed task by the other pair and in this way collaboration would expand from within the pairs/groups to between the pairs/groups. Finally, they listened to the tape and the students themselves compared their own writings with the original conversation. In order to gradually foster autonomy, in later stages the teacher encouraged and guided the students to create in pairs their own dialogues related to the first one rather than completing an incomplete dialogue provided by the researchers.

However, teaching of conversation in the control group was totally managed by the teacher; a practice which was part of the procedure of the language school. Therefore, the element of autonomy was absent. In this group, students only listened to the conversation and then some questions were asked by the teacher. After answering the questions, the students had to practice the conversation in pairs.

Watching a Film: At the beginning of the course, the researchers selected the film themselves and assigned a collaborative task which they thought would foster autonomy. The students were then asked to complete the task collaboratively. In this activity, one of the students in each pair sat in front of the screen and watched the movie. On the other hand, the other student had to sit behind the screen and just listen to the movie. During some scenes, the teacher paused the movie and the student who had been watching the movie had to explain all the parts to the one who had not watched it. The two students got involved in negotiation in order to share the scenes and the story of the movie. After two or three parts, the role of the students was changed in the pair. Then, each pair was asked to prepare a report of the movie. To do this, each pair first had to negotiate and decide on the content and manner of reporting. Since all the students were watching the same movie, each pair was assigned to report on one part of it.

In later sessions, the teacher asked the students to decide which movie they wanted to watch in class. To make such a decision, the students were asked to negotiate within groups the criteria for selecting the movie and then each group finally selected a movie. Interestingly, the first criterion they chose was the genre. Then the movies suggested by each group were listed and the class selected one from the list through voting. After watching the movie, the learners chose and planned the tasks. They offered different tasks such as explaining the story, questioning and answering about the film and suggesting a different ending to the movie. This activity provided an extra opportunity for all students to negotiate and decide about the task and at the same time fostered autonomy and independence from the teacher.

Unlike the experimental group, the control group did not have any choice of selecting the movie and only watched the movie which was part of the language schools’ curriculum. The teacher asked some comprehension questions and explained some difficult words afterwards. The other follow-up activities were also guided by the teacher. For example, the teacher would guide the learners to think about a different ending by writing some key words on the board based on which the learners would individually form their suggested ending and report it to the class.
**Story-Telling:** For this activity, each session the students had to summarize one chapter of a story in class. The story was selected from the books of Dominoes series, which are published by Oxford University. Therefore, time was given to the students to read the chapter, talk about the story and then summarize it. In the experimental group each student was asked to explain the story and others listened carefully and wrote down their feedback on the content, grammar, pronunciation and choice of word of the speech or even the gestures and posture of the speaker. Subsequently, all of the written feedback was collected and given to the speaker who had to read them all. Finally, he/she had to prepare and record another talk taking into account all the points in the feedback. The recorded talks were distributed among the peers for their further assessment which were again collected and rendered to the speaker. This provided an excellent opportunity to ask for peer evaluation. In later sessions the revised and recorded talk of each student was assessed by him/herself instead of the peers in order to have a movement to greater learner independence.

On the other hand, for the control group, the teacher corrected the errors of the students, both at the time of presentation and later on the recorded and revised talks, wrote them all on a piece of paper and gave it to the students.

**Talking Circle:** Learners need to experience the challenges of talking under real operating conditions. Taking part in talking circle provided the learners with opportunities to talk freely about subjects of their own choice.

The talking circle was a group activity that generally took place at the beginning of the class. The teacher and the students gathered in the talking circle to share and discuss experiences, anecdotes, news, special events and the like. In the experimental group, the students formed pairs based on their own choices and negotiated about the topic they wanted to select. After coming to a decision about the topic, they adopted different roles; one member as assistant/coach and the other as coachee. The assistant would prepare guidelines and then outlines for the talk of the coachee and the coachee would then prepare his/her talk with further help of the coach. To fulfill their roles, each member would surf the internet or read books or journals. Then for the next topic, they would shift roles. In case the learners would decide to change their partners for the next topic, they would make sure that in the new pair they would adopt a different role compared to the previous talk. However, in the control group the teacher would select the topic and prepare the outline and guidelines for all the students. While they were engaged in preparing their talks, the teacher would monitor them individually and give more assistance if needed.

**Tests:** To collect data from the sample of participants, four major instruments were utilized in this study.

**The General English Proficiency Test:** A PET with both multiple choice and open-ended item types was used to assure the homogeneity of each group of participants. PET consisted of two main sections; reading and writing in one part and listening in the other.

**The Oral Proficiency Tests:** Two oral proficiency tests, with the same structure, were administered to measure the oral proficiency level of the students in both groups. One of the oral tests was used at the onset of the research study to ensure that the participants of the two groups were homogeneous with respect to their oral proficiency. The second oral test, however, was administered after the treatment to test the null hypothesis of the study. The elicitation technique adopted for the oral tests was a combination of oral interview and picture-cued. The oral test followed the IELTS speaking test format.

The interview was divided to three parts. In part one, the participants answered general questions about themselves and about a familiar topic. In part two, they were required to talk about a particular topic and the interviewer asked the students to describe something or someone. In part three, the interviewer and the students engaged in a discussion of more abstract issues.

**The Oral Proficiency Rating Scale:** The researchers used the ‘Interview Scoring Profile’ [16], which is a validated analytic scale divided into four parts, namely grammar and vocabulary, discourse management, interactive communication and pronunciation. Each component received a rate ranging from 1.5 to 6.

**The Writing Rating Scale:** The researchers used the ‘Writing Scoring Profile’ [16], which is a validated analytic scale divided into six parts, namely, content, rhetorical features, cohesion, adequacy of vocabulary for purpose, sentence structure and mechanical accuracy. All components received a rate ranging from 0 to 3, except for cohesion and mechanical accuracy which received a rate ranging from 0 to 1.
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As the first step, 80 male and female learners were randomly selected from the pre-intermediate and intermediate levels of one language school. In the second step, PET was administered to them and 57 learners whose scores fell within the range of one standard deviation above and below the mean were selected and randomly divided into the a control and an experimental group.

Since PET, included a writing section for which the participants had to write a letter, two raters were required Mann-Whitney U 203.500 to rate the writings. The inter-rater consistency was checked by using correlational procedures. The Pearson correlation between the two ratings came out to be statistically significant at 0.01 level of significance (r = 0.85). After selecting the 57 participants whose scores fell one standard deviation around the mean of the sample (mean of 50.8 and standard deviation of 8.7), the oral proficiency test was given to them, the results of which were rated by the same two raters. The correlation between the two ratings came out to be statistically significant at 0.01 level of significance (r = 0.91). As the result of the oral proficiency test, 48 students whose scores fell within the range of one standard deviation above and below the sample mean were finally selected as the target sample of the study.

The next step was to check and see whether the control and experimental groups had approximately the same level of oral proficiency. In order to check the legitimacy of running a t-test, the two samples needed to be checked for normality. For this purpose, the researchers computed and checked the skewness ratios of the distribution of scores which came out to be 0.31 and 1.1 for the control and experimental group, respectively. Because the values were smaller than 1.96, it was concluded that the samples were normally distributed for each group.

The t-test results indicated that there was no significant difference between the mean scores of the control and experimental groups with respect to their oral proficiency (t=1.6, df =46, p=0.01< 0.05) (i.e., mean of control group= 12.12, mean of experimental group=11.25) and were thus considered as homogeneous prior to the treatment.

At the end of the treatment, another oral proficiency test was administered to both experimental and control groups to test the null hypothesis of the study. Two raters rated the performance of the participants on the oral test. The Pearson correlation results indicated that the two ratings were significantly correlated at 0.01 level of significance (r=0.88).

Table 1: The Mean Ranks for the Control and Experimental Groups on the Oral Proficiency Test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean Rank</th>
<th>Sum of Ranks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experimental</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>28.02</td>
<td>672.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>20.98</td>
<td>503.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>48</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Mann-Whitney Test Result for Comparing the Mean Rank of the Control and Experimental Groups on the Oral Proficiency Test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Oral Proficiency Test</th>
<th>Wilcoxon W</th>
<th>Z</th>
<th>Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mann-Whitney U</td>
<td>203.500</td>
<td>-1.791</td>
<td>0.043</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The normality of the distributions was checked for running a t-test. The skewness ratio for the control group came out to be 0.39 which was lower than 1.96, showing that the sample in the control group was normally distributed. For the experimental group, however, the ratio turned out to be 2.1, showing that the sample in the experimental group was not normally distributed. Therefore, since the scores of one of the groups were not distributed normally, running t-test was not legitimate and the Mann-Whitney test was used instead.

Table 1 demonstrates the mean ranks for the control and experimental groups on the oral proficiency posttest. As shown in Table 1, the experimental group obtained a higher mean rank than the control group. Table 2 shows the results of the Mann-Whitney test which tested whether this mean rank difference was significant or not. The result indicated a significant difference between the mean rank of the two groups and thus, the researchers were able to reject the null hypothesis.

Therefore, the results showed that students who practiced autonomy significantly outperformed those who didn’t in terms of oral proficiency. Firstly, the findings of this study added to the evidence for the benefits of developing learner autonomy in teaching oral proficiency. As noted by [17], encouraging learner autonomy is more and more acknowledged as a fruitful practice to promote language learning outcomes and as [18] maintains, giving learners the responsibility of planning and conducting learning activities makes them actively involved and results in better learning.

Secondly, since autonomy was practiced through a collaborative approach with the attempt to gradually move from learners’ interdependence to their independence, the significance of the result of this study lies in the evidence
that it provides for the advantage of dealing with autonomy in a social constructivist framework in which the development of autonomy, just like learning, becomes a socially mediated process. This aligns with [19]’s assertion that “enabling full participation in the social setting entails enabling people to make meaningful choices and decisions within that setting, so that they experience a sense of personal control or autonomy” (p. 18). The findings of this study also sides with [20]’s ideas which expanded the model of autonomy and added socio-cultural and political-critical perspectives to its conception emphasizing that context mediates learning. Thus, it is concluded that autonomous behavior is self-directed learning. In: H.B. Altman and C.V. James, (Eds.), Foreign language learning: Meeting individual need pp: 30-45. Pergamon.

Thirdly, the significance of the findings of this study lies in its specific focus on the impact of collaborative autonomy on one of the most important aspects of language proficiency, i.e. oral proficiency, because for many people speaking is the best means of self-representation and self-identity. However, one important point to consider is that since the sample was small in this study, the results must be interpreted rather cautiously.

CONCLUSION

The positive impact of practicing a collaborative approach to autonomy on learners’ oral proficiency implies that it is the teachers’ duty to plan procedures that provide the opportunity for the learners to negotiate with their peers on the choice and implementation of learning tasks so that through an authentic social interaction and building upon interdependence on their peers, they move toward a fruitful independence from the teacher. It is hoped that these findings will motivate teachers to break away from a tendency to interact with their students as language learners and rather engage with them as people. Borrowing from [19], teachers will be more successful in motivating their learners to communicate if they emphasize on their learners’ social identity and create opportunities for them to speak as themselves and express their own meanings.

REFERENCES


