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# Investigating the Effectiveness of Pair Work on a Conversational Cloze Task in EFL Classes

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The use of pair and small group activities is indeed one of the pedagogical legacies of communicative language teaching. The language teaching professionals who first propounded and then expounded the principles of communicative language teaching (e.g., Johnson & Morrow, 1981; Littlewood, 1981) were of the firm conviction that effective instructional activities are those that would enhance the amount of learner-learner interaction in the classroom. One of the techniques through which this type of interaction is maximized is to have learners do particular activities, such as solving a problem or doing a puzzle, in pairs or small groups. Despite the objection of some scholars who see pair and small group activities as Western communicative pedagogy (e.g., Kramsch & Sullivan, 1996), these activities appear in the majority of modern English language teaching textbooks. The pedagogical as well as theoretical reasons that justify the use of pair work in both foreign and second language classes will be discussed below.

## Literature Review

The use of pair and small group activities that promote interaction among learners is justified both on pedagogical and theoretical grounds. Pedagogically speaking, pair and small group activities promote a positive affective climate wherein students feel less anxious and more confident (Brown, 2001; Long & Porter, 1985), improve the quantity and quality of learner talk (Crookes & Chaudron, 2001; Harmer, 2001), and promote learner autonomy and self-directed learning (Brown, 2001; Nunan & Lamb, 1996). In addition, having learners work with each other allows a teacher to assign different tasks to different groups or pairs in order to manage a mixed proficiency class (McDonough & Shaw, 2003).

From a theoretical perspective, the use of pair and small group activities is supported by the interaction hypothesis (Gass, 1997; Long, 1996) and sociocultural theory (Lantolf, 2006; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Vygotsky, 1978). The interaction hypothesis suggests that interaction can facilitate L2 development by providing learners with comprehensible input, negative feedback, and opportunities to modify their output (Gass & Mackey, 2006). Types of interactional feedback that may promote learning include comprehension checks,

clarification requests, confirmation checks and recasts (Gass & Mackey, 2007; Long, 1996; Mackey, 2007). In addition to serving as a source of comprehensible input, this feedback can help learners notice gaps between their interlanguage and target-like forms (Schmidt, 1990; Schmidt & Frota, 1986). Interaction also provides learners with opportunities to produce modified output. This output not only allows learners to notice gaps and holes in their interlanguage but also helps them achieve greater metalinguistic awareness and test hypotheses about the rules they have constructed for the target language (Swain, 1995, 1998, 2005).

From a sociocultural perspective, based on Vygotsky's ideas (1978), it has been argued that when a more knowledgeable person supports, or “scaffolds,” a learner socially, cognitively, and affectively during interaction, the learner is likely to develop his or her linguistic as well as cognitive abilities (Donato, 1994; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Since Vygotsky's ideas have mostly been applied in developmental psychology, the more knowledgeable expert has often been regarded as an adult (e.g., a parent or a teacher). However, recent studies in the field of second language acquisition have demonstrated that scaffolding occurs not only in teacher-learner interaction but also in peer interaction in which learners work in pairs or small groups (Donato, 1994; Storch, 2005). The dialogic interaction which emerges as a result of learners' collaborative attempt to solve a given linguistic problem is what Swain (1997, 2000) has called collaborative dialogue. Swain (2000) defines collaborative dialogue as “dialogue in which speakers are engaged in problem solving and knowledge building” (p. 102). This suggests that collaborative dialogue involves learners in co-constructing new knowledge of and about language. Collaborative dialogues are usually analyzed through language related episodes (LREs), defined by Swain and Lapkin (1998) as “any part of a dialogue where the students talk about the language they are producing, question their language use, or correct themselves or others” (p. 326).

However, as Storch (2007) rightly observes, “despite the strong pedagogical and theoretical arguments for the use of small group and pair work, there has been relatively little empirical research comparing small group and individual work” (p. 145), particularly when it comes to grammar-focused tasks. In an early attempt to fill this gap, Storch (1999) compared ESL learners' individual and pair performance on two isomorphic versions of three grammar-focused activities: a cloze exercise, a text reconstruction, and a short composition. The study found that pair work had a positive effect on the learners' overall grammatical accuracy but a varying effect on certain grammatical forms. For example, the use of articles in reconstructed texts was more accurate when the activity was done in pairs, but it was not so in the case of the cloze exercise. However, as Storch (2007) comments, the findings of this study should be interpreted with caution because of a likely practice effect caused by having the same participants perform the exercises in pairs and

individually. Moreover, the higher performance of the learners in the collaborative mode may have been due to the longer time they spent on the exercises. As Storch (1999) put it, “the time taken to complete the exercises in pairs almost doubled when compared to the time taken to complete them individually” (p. 370).

In another study, Kuiken and Vedder (2002) investigated pair work of Dutch EFL learners on a dictogloss. They analyzed the transcripts of the pair talk for both simple and elaborate noticing of passive grammatical forms. Simple noticing was defined as instances where the learners identified the targeted passive forms, whereas elaborate noticing was operationalized as instances where the learners discussed the form and then considered alternative forms. The study found that the pair talk data contained numerous instances of elaborate noticing of the passive forms; however, there were differences between pairs in terms of their level of noticing.

More recently, Storch (2007) investigated the merits of pair work on a text editing task in ESL classes. Surprisingly enough, there were no statistically significant differences in the accuracy of texts amended by pairs compared to those amended by learners individually. Moreover, the items related to word forms were amended more frequently than the items related to aspect choices and the use of articles.

Given the small body of studies that have investigated the effect of pair work on grammar-focused activities, there is clearly a need for further research in this respect using other task types. The study reported here aimed to fill this void.

## Research Questions

The purpose of the present study is to investigate the effectiveness of pair work for EFL learners by comparing the accuracy of their performance on completing a conversational cloze task in pairs and individually. Thus, the following two research questions guided the study:

- 1) Do learners working in pairs complete the conversational cloze task more accurately than learners who do the same task individually?
- 2) If so, which word categories benefit from pair work?

## Method

### Participants

Forty-two Iranian adult learners (24 females and 18 males) taking an intermediate-level English course at a private language school in Tehran volunteered to participate in this study. They were university students majoring in various fields of study. Their average age was 21 and their TOEFL scores were in the 450-500 range. The participants were randomly assigned to experimental and control groups. Twenty-eight students formed the experimental group and fourteen students formed the control group.

## Task

The task used in the study was a conversational cloze (see Appendix). The reason for selecting this type of a text is that these passages represent features of spoken language and supposedly encourage further interaction between learners. The original conversation was taken from the recording script of a Cambridge IELTS course (Jakeman & McDowell, 1999). The cloze version of the conversation contained 30 gaps and was made by the researcher. The gaps included three different word categories: articles (10), prepositions (10), and coordinating conjunctions (10). These categories indicate that the task was a grammar-focused one.

## Procedure

The participants in the control group did the task individually. In the experimental group, however, they worked in pairs, forming fourteen self-selected dyads (eight female-female and six male-male dyads). Following Storch (1999), in order to promote further joint production, each pair in the experimental group was given only one copy of the task. This made the total number of cloze exercises collected from the control and experimental groups equal with fourteen samples from each.

It should be noted that students in this language school were used to working in pairs as they were studying from the *Interchange* series of textbooks in which there are many instances of pair and small group activities. Nevertheless, the conversational cloze was a new task type for them. This novelty, as some of the participants later reported, was a source of motivation for them to do the task more enthusiastically.

The participants in both groups were allowed as much time as they needed to complete the task. The mean time spent on completing the task for the control and experimental groups was 25 and 30 minutes, respectively. Therefore, on average, the time on task for students who worked in pairs was longer than those who worked individually.

The participants in the experimental group were encouraged to collaborate with each other while completing the task, and the researcher monitored them to make sure that they would speak in English. No attempt was made to audiotape the learners' pair talk; however, the researcher made sporadic notes as he listened to some of the pairs.

## Results

An exact answer scoring system was utilized for marking the task. Each correct answer was given one mark, so the maximum score for the task was 30. Table 1 reports the means and standard deviations of control and experimental groups on the conversational cloze task.

A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was used to compare the overall performance of the two groups on the given task. Moreover, separate univariate *F* tests were employed to determine if there was any significant difference between the two groups on any of the three word categories (articles, prepositions, and coordinating conjunctions).

Table 1

*Descriptive Statistics of the Conversational Cloze Task*

Group	n	<u>Total</u>		<u>Articles</u>		<u>Prepositions</u>		<u>Coord. Conjs.</u>	
		M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
<b>Cont.</b>	14	16.78	2.00	4.79	.89	4.36	.92	7.64	1.55
<b>Exp.</b>	14	22.71	1.89	7.36	1.08	7.36	1.39	8.00	1.10

A MANOVA was run indicating the three dependent measures of articles, prepositions, and coordinating conjunctions. The Wilks's Lambda test  $F = 36.37, p = .001$  resulted in a significant main effect for the pair work. This indicates that there is a statistically significant difference between the mean score of the experimental group ( $M = 22.71$ ) and that of the control group ( $M = 16.78$ ). Therefore, the first research question was answered in the positive; namely, learners who completed the task in pairs outperformed those who attempted it individually.

To answer the second research question regarding which word categories would benefit from pair work, univariate  $F$  tests for the three word categories were employed. Table 2 shows the results of these univariate  $F$  tests.

Table 2

*Univariate F Test for Articles, Prepositions, and Coordinating Conjunctions*

Source	Score	df	SS	Ms	F	Sig
<b>Pair work</b>	Articles	26	46.28	46.28	47.06*	.001
	Preps.	26	63.00	63.00	44.96*	.001
	Coord. Conjs.	26	.89	.89	.49	.48

$p < .05$

The univariate test for articles showed that there was a significant difference between the learners' mean scores on articles when they worked in pairs than when they worked individually,  $F(1,26) = 47.06, p < .05$ . Likewise, the univariate test for prepositions resulted in a significant main effect for pair work,  $F(1,26) = 44.96, p < .05$ . Nonetheless, the univariate test for coordinating conjunctions showed no significant difference between the groups,  $F(1,26) = .49, p = .48$ . This means that pair work did not have much of a facilitative effect on coordinating conjunctions.

### Discussion

This study explored the efficacy of pair work in EFL classes by comparing the performance of a group of learners when they completed a conversational cloze task under two conditions: individually and collaboratively. In the individual condition, the learners were not allowed to seek the help of a fellow classmate. On the contrary, in the collaborative condition, they were asked to work in pairs on one copy of the task, listen to each other's comments carefully and come up with answers representing a joint effort. The analysis showed that when learners worked in pairs collaboratively, they were more successful in that they produced more accurate responses. Thus, the first research question was answered in the positive.

The following excerpts, noted down by the researcher as he listened to some of the pairs, are examples of LREs which briefly illustrate how the knowledge co-constructed through collaborative attempts accounts for the better performance of pairs compared to that of individuals.

The following LRE is an instance of a collaborative dialogue in which the learners solve a linguistic problem by talking about language and thereby building knowledge of it. Apparently, S1 has a problem with the meaning of "free of charge." He then suggests preposition "for" to complete the expression after getting its meaning from S2. S2 suggests preposition "of", which S1 subsequently approves of by remembering what he had heard from a former teacher.

S1: And sandwiches are served free . . . charge, what's it mean?

S2: Means free without money.

S1: So free for charge.

S2: No, free of charge.

S1: Yeah, yeah, free of charge, I hear it from teacher.

Let's consider another LRE.

In the next LRE, S1 asks S2 to help her with item number 10. While S2 seems to be confident about the answer through her suggestion of the expression "on board," S1 is doubtful about the meaning of the whole phrase. S2 puts an end to this doubt by reassuring S1 about the meaning of "on board."

S1: What about 10? What's it mean?

S2: And there's a kiosk on board.

S1: On board? What's it?

S2: On board ... means on the ship.

S1: So board here means ship?

S2: Yes, they're talking about ship.

Although this study did not aim to analyze the LREs of the learners' pair talk, the above LREs are typical of what was exchanged between the learners as they completed the task in pairs. They indicate how the knowledge built through a collaborative joint effort results in the better performance of learners who worked with a fellow partner.

As for the second research question regarding which type of words would be more affected by pair work, the study offers interesting findings. As mentioned earlier, the results of the analysis revealed that the difference between the mean score of articles and prepositions in both groups was statistically significant, while in the case of coordinating conjunctions this difference was modest. This suggests that pair work, along with the collaborative dialogue that it generates, helps learners with certain function words or grammatical features. One reason could be the relative complexity of certain grammatical categories and learners' readiness to collaborate over them. Although complexity of grammatical forms is basically related to the developmental stage of the learners' interlanguage, there are certain forms (e.g., articles and prepositions) that English learners seem to have perpetual problem with. Coordinating conjunctions, on the other hand, are not as complex to use, at least for intermediate learners, as articles and prepositions. Thus, given that the coordinating conjunctions required to complete the task were only limited to three forms, specifically *and*, *but*, and *so*, it is little wonder why learners in the individual mode had as good a performance as the learners in the collaborative mode. Regarding articles and prepositions, due to the complexity of the rules associated with them and learners' psycholinguistic readiness to negotiate them, collaborative attempts in tackling the problem were more effective than individual endeavors.

The findings of this study corroborate the findings of Storch (1999) but do not lend support to those of Storch (2007) in that, overall, learners completed the task more successfully in pairs than individually. However, as for different grammatical forms, the present study supports neither of Storch's studies. The learners' pair work on the use of articles in this study seems to have benefited them more than individual work when compared to Storch's studies.

One last point worth noting concerns the time spent completing the task in each group. As mentioned earlier, the learners in the collaborative mode, on average, were five minutes longer on task than the learners in the individual mode. This is different from Storch's (1999) report in which "the time taken to complete the exercises in pairs almost

doubled when compared to the time taken to complete them individually” (p.370). This implies that the findings of the current study are less confounded by time factor, and thus could be more reliably attributed to the given treatment.

### Conclusion

The findings of the present study suggest that having EFL learners work in pairs while doing a grammar-focused task is likely to improve their overall performance with varying degrees of effectiveness on different grammatical features. It follows, therefore, that pair work and collaborative dialogue may promote accuracy for certain grammatical items. Apparently, more complex grammatical items (e.g., articles and prepositions) are better candidates to benefit from pair work than those which do not encompass a wide range of complicated rules. Moreover, learners must be at the right level of language proficiency to enjoy the beneficial effects of collaborative work. In this study, the learners were apparently ready to negotiate forms like articles and prepositions and that is why their collaborative efforts were fruitful. However, given the small number of tokens (only 10) for each grammatical form, these findings are only suggestive and ought to be interpreted with caution. In spite of this, one thing is clear: provided that learners are at the right level of interlanguage development, when they pool their linguistic resources together through joint effort, they are empowered to solve more language-related problems. The collaborative dialogue emerging from peer interaction is beneficial inasmuch as it provides opportunities for learners to focus on form while expressing their intended meaning. Nevertheless, whether engagement in this sort of dialogue results in long term acquisition of L2 forms is an issue that requires further empirical research. For the time being, the findings of the current study, along with those of similar studies conducted in ESL settings, point out that the grammatical output of adult English language learners tends to become more accurate when they work in pairs than when they attempt a similar task individually. This is a welcome opportunity that teachers of other foreign languages can seize and experiment with their adult learners.

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## Appendix

**Read the following conversation and fill in the blanks with ONE suitable word.**

CLERK: Good Morning, Blue Harbor Cruises. How can I help you?

TOURIST: Oh, uh, good morning. Um... can you tell me something (1) \_\_\_\_ the different cruises you run?

CLERK: Well... we run three cruises everyday, each offering something slightly different.

TOURIST: Let me just get (2) \_\_\_\_ pencil (3) \_\_\_\_ I can make a note of this.

CLERK: Firstly, there's the Highlight Cruise, ... then we do (4) \_\_\_\_ Noon Cruise and we also have our Coffee Cruise.

TOURIST: Um ... could you tell me a bit about them? When they leave, how often, that sort (5) \_\_\_\_ thing?

CLERK: Well, the Highlight Cruise is \$16 per person, (6) \_\_\_\_ that leaves at 9.30 every morning (7) \_\_\_\_ takes two hours to go round the harbor.

TOURIST: Right ... 9.30 (8) \_\_\_\_ do you get coffee or refreshments?

CLERK: No, (9) \_\_\_\_ there's a kiosk (10) \_\_\_\_ board where you can buy drinks and snacks. And we do provide everyone with (11) \_\_\_\_ free souvenir postcard.

TOURIST: Right.

CLERK: And then there's our Noon Cruise (12) \_\_\_\_ \$42 per person. This is more expensive (13) \_\_\_\_, of course, it takes longer and (14) \_\_\_\_ that price you get (15) \_\_\_\_ three-course lunch.

TOURIST: Oh, that sounds good ... And what about (16) \_\_\_\_ last one?

CLERK: That's the Coffee Cruise. Well, that's \$25 each. It takes two and a half hours.

TOURIST: When does that leave?

CLERK: At a quarter past two daily.

TOURIST: (17) \_\_\_\_ presumably the coffee is included?

CLERK: Yes, and sandwiches are served free (18) \_\_\_\_ charge.

TOURIST: I think the Coffee Cruise would suit us best, as lunch is included at (19) \_\_\_\_ hotel. Can I book for two people (20) \_\_\_\_ tomorrow, please?

CLERK: No need to book. Just be down (21) \_\_\_\_ the quay at 2 o'clock. All our cruises depart (22) \_\_\_\_ Jetty No.2.

TOURIST: Can you tell me where that is exactly?

CLERK: Yes, No. 2 Jetty is opposite (23) \_\_\_\_ shops. It's clearly sign posted.

TOURIST: Right ... (24) \_\_\_\_ can you tell me, is there a commentary?

CLERK: Yes, there's a commentary on all the cruises.

TOURIST: Is it possible to listen to (25) \_\_\_\_ commentary in Japanese? My friend doesn't speak much English.

CLERK: It's in English only, I'm afraid, (26) \_\_\_\_ the tour guides usually speak some Japanese, (27) \_\_\_\_ she'll be able to ask questions.

TOURIST: Oh fine.

CLERK: Oh and one other thing - I should just mention that it gets extremely hot (28) \_\_\_\_ the upper deck at this time of year, so it's (29) \_\_\_\_ good idea to wear (30) \_\_\_\_ hat. Otherwise you could get quite badly sunburned.

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## Conference Announcements

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**Applied Linguistics Association of Korea 2009 Conference.** December 5, 2009. The Applied Linguistics Association of Korea (ALAK) will be holding a conference on at Chung-Ang University, Seoul, South Korea. The conference theme is "Foreign Language Education Policy in the Korean Context." Web site <http://www.alak.or.kr>

**Hawaii TESOL 2010 Annual Conference.** February 13, 2010. The 2010 Hawaii TESOL Spring Conference will be held at Leeward Community College on the island of Oahu in Hawaii. Presentation proposals are being accepted until December 1, 2009. Web site <http://www.hawaiitesol.org>

**CamTESOL Conference on English Language Teaching.** February 27-28, 2010. The 6th annual CamTESOL Conference on English Language Teaching will be held in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. The conference theme is "One World: World Englishes." The conference brings together classroom teachers of English, future teachers of English, administrators of English language schools and universities, educators with an interest in international language education, donors interested in supporting English specifically and international education generally, ELT-related individuals and institutions (e.g., book publishers, book shop representatives, Ministry of Education representatives, NGO representatives), foreign experts or researchers on Cambodia who wish to network within the ELT community in Cambodia, and interested Cambodian residents. Web site <http://www.camtesol.org>

**44th Annual TESOL Convention. March 24-27, 2010.** Come "Re-Imagine" TESOL, Boston, Massachusetts, USA. The convention will kick off at 5:30 pm with the opening plenary featuring Howard Gardner. Web site: <http://www.tesol.org>