Cooperative Pair Work and EFL Learners' Performance on a Form-focused Task

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Abstract

The present study was carried out to investigate the effect of pair work on a cloze elide task in two EFL classes. To this end, sixty-three adult learners formed an experimental and a comparison group. Both groups performed the same task in pairs. However, the nature of their pair work was different. While the participants in the experimental group were instructed to do the assigned task through the formulate-share-listen-create cooperative learning structure by receiving some training, the participants in the comparison group did the pair work without any training. Results of the data analysis indicated that the experimental group significantly outperformed the control group on the given task. This suggests that dividing learners into pairs and giving them a task to do is nothing but pseudo pair work unless it is informed by cooperative learning principles and conditions.

Keywords: cooperative learning, collaboration, pair work

Introduction

In recent years, pair and small group work activities have been increasingly used in foreign language classrooms. This is partly due to the emergence of communicative language teaching goals and these accord great importance to developing communicative competence. The emphasis is also partly due to the proliferation of educational models and textbooks that promote cooperative learning and peer interaction, and the changing nature of work in the information age.

Proponents of using pair work argue that it provides learners with more time to speak (Harmer, 2007), promotes learner motivation, responsibility, and autonomy, and helps them feel less anxious and more confident while speaking (Brown, 2001).

Though pair work is a powerful pedagogical tool that facilitates learning by fostering cooperation among learners, it should not be thought of as Aladdin's

magic lamp to perform miracles. Teachers should realize that dividing learners into pairs and giving them a task to do without consideration of basic cooperative learning principles amounts to nothing but pseudo (untrained, unprepared) pair work. The purpose of the present study, therefore, is to examine whether cooperative pair work improves EFL learners' performance better than pseudo pair work when it comes to a form-focused task. Before this, however, we need to briefly review the basic principles of cooperative learning.

Cooperative learning

Johnson, Johnson, and Holubec (1994) define cooperative learning as "the instructional use of small groups [two people or more] through which students work together to maximize their own and each other's learning" (p. 4). They further posit that cooperative learning incorporates five important elements: positive interdependence, individual accountability, face-to-face interaction, collaborative skills, and group processing.

Positive interdependence is present when all group members' contributions are needed to achieve a shared goal. In other words, they should learn that they sink or swim together. Individual accountability ensures that although the task is group-oriented, each member of the group is held responsible to participate and help other group members accomplish the task. Therefore, teachers should know how to assess each member of the group and give feedback on his or her progress so that it becomes clear who needs further support and assistance. Face-to-face interaction requires participants to do real work in real time together, thus promoting communicative competence and each other's success. The fourth element of cooperative learning requires that students be taught and encouraged to use necessary collaborative skills such as asking for help, giving reasons, disagreeing politely, active listening, etc. And finally, group processing structures the process such that group members must review, evaluate, and reflect upon their work together to bring about the necessary changes as to which actions should continue and which actions should stop or be changed. Such structure promotes additional communication in the target language.

Another important aspect of cooperative learning is the task structure itself, namely ways of organizing the interaction in the classroom (Kagan & Kagan 2009). Structuring often involves a series of steps which clearly describe what

learners should do at each stage. Several well-known cooperative learning structures, based on Olsen and Kagan (1992) and Williams (2002) are as follows:

Numbered Heads Together. This is a four-step procedure in which students number off within groups, say 1, 2, 3, or 4 if they are in groups of four (Step 1); the teacher asks them a question such as "Can you show the difference between gaze and stare through an example?" (Step 2); students work cooperatively to come up with a good example (Step 3); and the teacher calls a number from 1 to 4 and only students with the called number can raise their hands to answer the question (Step 4).

Think-Pair-Share. This is a three-step structure in which students in each pair or group individually think about a given question or problem for a few minutes (Step 1) pair up with a partner (Step 2), and share their answers with other pairs or with the class (Step 3).

Formulate-Share-Listen-Create. This is a four-step refinement of the Think-Pair-Share technique in which students in each pair individually formulate a response to a given question or problem (Step 1), share their thinking with a partner (Step 2), listen carefully to what their partner has come up with (Step 3), and create a response that is more refined than either of the individual responses.

Possible disadvantages

Despite much success with cooperative tasks, many teachers complain that pair work, particularly in large classes, is noisy and encourages learners to fall back on their mother tongue. While there is some truth in these complaints, it should be mentioned that they are managerial issues that can be overcome and hence should not discourage teachers.

Of course, too much noise can cause teachers to lose control of the class, and may disturb neighboring classes. However, teachers who are concerned about the noise level can follow the suggested activities offered by Kagan and Kagan (2009) such as using stoplight cards. Using this technique, the teacher shows a green card to the pairs whose voice level is fine, a yellow card to those who need to quiet down a bit, and a red card to those who need to become completely silent and count to ten before starting work again.

The second disadvantage of using pair work identified by some teachers is that it may encourage the use of the learners' mother tongue. For this reason, many conscientious teachers often feel guilty about using pair work in their classes. However, as Storch and Aldosari (2010) have recently remarked, when learners are assigned to work in pairs or small groups, they tend to use their mother tongue "judiciously," particularly "for a range of functions deemed helpful for language learning" (p. 358) such as task management, generating ideas, and lexical and grammatical deliberations. Therefore, language teachers need not worry about the learners' use of their mother tongue so much in pair work activities.

Pair work and form-focused activities

In recent years, investigating the effect of pair and small group work on form-focused activities like text-editing, grammatical cloze, and so forth, has been the topic of a number of intriguing studies. Storch (2007), for instance, investigated the differential effects of pair and individual work on a text-editing task in an ESL setting. Her findings revealed that there were no significant differences in the mean accuracy score of texts which the participants had edited collaboratively compared to those which they had edited individually. However, further analysis of the transcribed conversations showed that pair work had been useful to students in that it prompted them to reflect on language through a number of interactional moves such as seeking confirmation or requesting for clarifications. One must look to the process as well as the product for language learning benefits.

The performance of EFL learners on pair work versus individual work was compared in another study (Baleghizadeh, 2009). The task at hand was a cloze elide with three types of blanks: prepositions, articles, and coordinating conjunctions. The results revealed that the participants who completed the task in pairs outperformed those who worked individually. However, further analysis revealed differences on the three grammatical forms. While the participants in the experimental group outperformed their peers in the control group on articles and prepositions, their performance on coordinating conjunctions did not significantly differ. It was concluded that this might be due to the complex nature of grammar rules related to articles and prepositions compared to the simpler rules governing the use of coordinating conjunctions.

Comparison between pair and individual work on a word-formation task was the topic of another study (Baleghizadeh, 2010). In this study, the participants were asked to complete two texts by adding prefixes and suffixes to a number of given words. The participants in the experimental group did this in pairs through the Think-Pair-Share cooperative learning structure, while the participants in the control group did it individually. The results confirmed the superior performance of the experimental group.

Most recently, Baleghizadeh (2012) compared the differential performance of two groups of English for general academic purposes (EGAP) students on a vocabulary gap-fill activity in an EFL setting. The participants in the comparison group were asked to choose a partner and do the assigned task without receiving any instruction on what cooperative learning is (traditional, pseudo pair work). The participants in the experimental group, on the other hand, were informed of the elements of cooperative learning prior to doing the activity, namely having a shared goal, individual accountability, etc., hence forming true (trained) cooperative pairs. The results indicated that the experimental group significantly outperformed the comparison group.

Rationale

There are a number of points that should be observed based on the above studies. First, all of them involved an experimental group that completed the given task in pairs, and a control or comparison group that performed the same task individually. Secondly, almost all of them reported a beneficial effect for the role of pair work. Finally and most importantly, in only two studies (Baleghizadeh, 2010, 2012) did the participants in the experimental group work in a truly cooperative way. Although in the rest of the studies, the learners worked in pairs, their pair work did not follow any of the cooperative learning structures and hence must be described merely as pseudo pair work. It appears, then, that most research exemplifies one of two learning conditions: one characterized by groups formed to do structured work informed by cooperative learning elements (cooperative pairs) and the other by groups formed to do haphazard pair work (pseudo pairs). To date, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, there has been no study reported in the literature that has compared the performance of learners in these two learning conditions. Even in Baleghizadeh's 2012 study, the cooperative group met only one

of the conditions, namely although they were informed of cooperative learning elements, they did not do structured pair work. Given this, there is obviously a need for a study that compares the effect of truly cooperative pair work, (particularly through unexplored cooperative structures such as formulate-share-listen-create), with pseudo pair work on a form-focused task. Therefore, the present study was conducted to explore the following research question: Do EFL learners who use cooperative pair work through the formulate-share-listen-create pattern perform better on a cloze elide task than those who do it through pseudo pair work?

Method

Participants

The participants in this study were 63 adult students (43 females and 20 males) who were in their first year of studies in the 4-year English Language and Literature degree program at Shahid Beheshti University, Tehran, Iran. The participants' mean age was 19 and their average English language proficiency, based on IELTS band scores, was 6.5. The participants were members of intact classes randomly assigned to either the experimental (n=40) or comparison (n=23) group. The participants were taking a grammar course taught by the author at the time of the experiment. All the participants were informed that they were taking part in a research study, which they all consented to. The data were collected in the ninth and tenth weeks of the semester for the comparison and experimental groups, respectively.

Task

A cloze elide task, partially modified from CAE Practice Tests: Plus 2 by Stanton and Morris (1999), was used to collect the data. Unlike an ordinary cloze, where there are gaps to be filled in, a cloze elide is a text in which learners must identify a number of intentionally inserted words which make the passage ungrammatical. There are three reasons for selecting a cloze elide task as the data collection instrument for this study. First, a cloze elide, though widely used in Cambridge ESOL examinations, is a relatively underexplored form-focused task in research studies. Second, it is objectively scored and hence eliminates the need for a second rater. Third, cloze elide tasks are almost never used in the context of the present research. Thus, the researcher's assumption was that this novelty would enhance the participants' motivation. The cloze elide task used in the present study was an

18-numbered-line text in which there was an extra word inserted in some of the lines (see Appendix A for a portion of it). Traditionally, learners are asked to go through the text and put a tick next to the lines that were correct and identify the unnecessary word in the ungrammatical lines by writing them in the given spaces.

Procedure

The participants in both groups were asked to do the task in pairs. One session prior to the experiment, the author explained the elements of cooperative learning to the participants in the experimental group. He told them that each pair should submit a satisfactory, high-quality piece of work which is the product of two heads working together cooperatively. In addition, he reminded them of the value of certain collaborative skills such as active listening, seeking and offering help, disagreeing politely, explaining, praising, and encouraging.

During the next class session, on the day of the experiment, the participants were asked to form self-selected pairs. The participants in each pair were given two copies of the cloze elide task, However, to observe the principle of pursuing a shared goal, they were asked to submit only one final copy as the final product of their joint work. Thus, although there were 40 participants in the experimental group, the final data collected from them consisted of 20 copies. The participants in the experimental group were also instructed to follow the formulate-share-listen-create cooperative learning structure. Accordingly, they were asked to:

- formulate their answer to each item individually
- share their answers with their partner
- Listen carefully and attentively to their partner's answer, noting similarities and differences in their answers
- Create a joint answer as the outcome of the best of both partners' ideas

Hence, it can be argued that the pairs in the experimental group were truly cooperative pairs for several reasons. First, they were aware of cooperative learning principles, second, they produced a joint work, namely something that was better than what each member would have been be able to produce individually, and thirdly (and more importantly), their joint effort was informed by a proven cooperative learning structure.

The participants in the comparison group were also instructed to form self-selected pairs, (and one small group of three, as the group consisted of 23 in total).

Like the participants in the experimental group, they each received one copy of the same cloze elide task. They were neither informed of cooperative learning structures nor asked to submit a joint production. They were merely told to work in pairs, perform the assigned task, and submit their own copy. In this way, the data collected from the comparison group consisted of 23 copies.

The participants were given as much time as they needed to complete the task. The researcher also asked the participants to voluntarily audiotape their pair talks with their cell phones. Fortunately, three pairs in the experimental group and four pairs in the comparison group volunteered to do so.

Statistical analysis

Since there were only two groups involved in the study, a t-test was used to determine if there was a statistically significant difference between the mean score of the experimental and comparison groups. The statistical analysis was carried out using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) with alpha set at .05.

Results

Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations for both the experimental and the comparison groups.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for experimental and comparison groups

Groups	n	M	SD
Experimental	20	16.10	1.02
Comparison	23	14.78	1.41

The results indicate a slight advantage for the experimental pair work and result of the t-test indicated that the difference was significant: $t(41) = 3.45$, $p = .001$, Cohen's $d = 1.43$. This indicates that the learners who completed the cloze elide task through the cooperative learning structure of "formulate-share-listen-create" had a more successful performance than the learners who did unplanned, non-structured pair work. The research question of the study was answered in the positive.

Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the effect of cooperative pair work on form-focused activities in EFL classes. To this end, the performance of two groups of EFL learners on a cloze elide task was compared under two conditions: cooperative pair work versus pseudo pair work. The first condition was characterized by producing joint work following the formulate-share-listen-create cooperative learning structure, while the second was marked by non-structured pair work with no joint production. The findings indicated that the first condition proved to be more effective than the second condition. There are two reasons that can account for this difference.

The first reason is related to the collaborative skills such as active listening, giving reasons, encouraging, etc. that the participants in the experimental group were taught to employ. As mentioned before, one session prior to the experiment, the participants in the experimental group received some training in using several collaborative skills, particularly in active listening. This is because effective communication and understanding largely depends on listening carefully. The participants were told that active listening indicates that they are closely following their partner and encourages him or her to keep talking. To ensure this, they were given several guidelines such as facing their partner, encouraging him or her to continue by short verbal comments such 'You are right' or 'Go ahead, please', offering positive facial expressions such as a nod or a smile, being aware of their body language by not crossing their arms, and reflecting on what they have heard by paraphrasing. Active listening was also emphasized because it was one of the steps involved in the formulate-share-listen-create structure that required the participants to listen carefully to their partner's answers and suggestions before coming up with a joint response.

The second reason for the significantly better performance of the participants in the experimental group is related to the nature of the conversations that they produced as a result of making a joint production. Based on the researcher's observation, the participants in the experimental group produced partially longer and more sophisticated interactional exchanges than their counterparts in the comparison group. The joint work that the participants in the experimental group were supposed to create encouraged them to talk more and exchange further information. Indeed, results showed that the experimental pairs averaged 17 minutes of inter-

action in accomplishing the task, while the comparison groups averaged only 13 minutes. An examination of the recorded interactions revealed that the participants in the comparison group talked very little and talk only occurred when they came across a difficulty. The following excerpts exemplify the difference.

Excerpt 1 (from the experimental group)
S1: Which word do you choose for number 8?
S2: I think we should say after that at college. Is this your answer?
S1: No, we shouldn't add words, we should omit wrong words.
S2: Oh, excellent you are right, I forgot it. So what's your answer?
S1: After is wrong word, it shouldn't be here. At college is place, we can't bring it after *after*.
S2: So at college, I worked for a number of years, umm, this is correct. I said after that at college, I forgot to omit this wrong word.

Excerpt 2 (from the comparison group)
S3: Is number 6 I or after?
S4: I is OK. After is wrong. We can omit I but it's also correct.

The above excerpts are both related to the eighth line of the cloze elide task (see Appendix). It is obvious that the participants in the first extract are engaged in a more elaborate exchange of information. S2 is adding a word to the text to fix the error, and S1 reminds her that they ought to remove the unnecessary words from the text rather than add new words. Moreover, S2's response 'Oh, excellent you are right … So what's your answer?' also suggests that she is listening actively to her partner as she is eagerly encouraging her to proceed. This is in sharp contrast to the short conversation between S3 and S4 over the same item. S3 is asking whether 'I' or 'after' is the unnecessary word to be omitted and S4 simply responds that 'after' is the word to be removed. This lack of interest in having a lengthier conversation, a distinct feature of interactions exchanged between most pairs in the comparison group, is most likely due to the fact that they were busy completing their own task sheet and did not feel that they needed to share their responses with a partner for a shared goal.

Conclusion

The findings of this small scale study suggest that the performance of EFL learners on a form-focused task can improve when they have been prepared to work in truly cooperative ways. The main implication that can be drawn from this is that merely dividing learners into pairs and giving them something to do is nothing but pseudo pair work. To qualify as cooperative pair work, teachers should ensure that a number of conditions are met. First, the pairs or groups should be aware of why they are working together. This can be ensured through making them aware of cooperative learning and its benefits. For example, it is important that learners realize the value of listening carefully to each other, as it is an important source of learning. Second, the groups should be given some guidelines as to the steps they should go through while working together. This can be achieved by having them work through one of the cooperative learning structures such as think-pair-share or formulate-share-listen-create. Third, groups should be encouraged to submit a joint production. Although they may receive individual copies of the task sheet, they should be advised to pool their knowledge together and create one final copy which represents their joint thinking and effort.

Finally, as with most small scale studies, this study has a number of limitations, suggesting that caution should be exercised while interpreting the findings. Apart from the limited number of the participants and the very few items under investigation, the present study revealed only a small (albeit significant) difference in performance. Further research ought to involve a greater number of items on the task instrument. Furthermore, scores alone do not accurately reflect all of the possible language learning benefits. More detailed analysis of the quality and quantity of interaction during the process of completing the task may reveal far more important advantages. In EFL settings, learners often suffer from a lack of sufficient opportunities to proceduralize their knowledge via communicative use of the target language. Sometimes the process is more important than the product.

This study also suffers from lack of a third group in which the learners could have done the same task individually. In the absence of this third group, it is not possible to determine whether pseudo pair work has any advantages over individual work.

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Appendix
(A Part of the Cloze Elide Task)

In most lines of the following text, there is one unnecessary word. It is either grammatically incorrect or does not fit in with the sense of the text. For each numbered line, find the unnecessary word and then write it in the space on the left. You can indicate the lines that are correct with a (√).

Starting Over Again

1 ……. Ever since I can remember, I have always loved to draw. When I

2 ……. was very young, I scribbled all them over my bedroom walls until I

3 ……. mastered paper and pencil. Later, from an enlightened schoolteacher

4 ……. made sure of that I went on to art school and it was there that I

5 ……. drew my first life model, which was a such wonderful experience.

6 ……. My tutors encouraged me to take up drawing and seriously, but I

7 ……. ignored again their advice. I wanted to do something more exciting

8 ……. as a career and I chose graphic design. After at college, I worked

9 ……. for a number of years as Art Director at a small publishing company.