

## The Impact of Utilizing a Collaborative Approach on Teenage Iranian EFL Learners' Vocabulary Retention

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### Abstract

For many years, different ways of teaching new words have been used in curriculum planning. Nowadays most researchers argue that incorporating vocabulary in classroom tasks can facilitate vocabulary teaching. The goal of the current study was to investigate the impact of collaboration on vocabulary development of teenage EFL learners in a language institute Iran. To this purpose and as an experimental method of research, two intact groups of learners were chosen to participate in the experiment. The population of the study was made up of eighty five EFL learners in a language institute in Iran. To homogenize the study subjects, an Oxford Placement Test was administered and only those subjects whose scores fell one standard deviation above and below the mean were selected for the study. The other instrument was using two sets of vocabulary tests which were used to tap the initial vocabulary knowledge of the learners in both groups: pre and post vocabulary tests. The same type of material was used for both experimental group (EG) and control group (CG). In other words, the learners in both groups were instructed through the same sources, the same teacher, and the same teaching hours. Results revealed that, the participants in the CG did not benefit from the individual teaching processes as much as the learners in EG. That is, the learners in the CG in spite of depending on the teacher and his assistance in various level of vocabulary presentation did not improve as satisfactorily as the EG and thus were left behind the EG.

**Key words:** collaboration, learner-based, vocabulary, language learning

### INTRODUCTION

Teaching and learning of vocabulary are the essential parts of any SLA and FLA and TEL. The area of studying and their register and genre of learning are the most important features of learning and teaching of vocabularies in any languages. The Teachers and the instructors should know why students want to learn vocabulary and what kind of vocabularies they need. The vocabularies that they need in social interactions (spoken language) are completely different with their written vocabularies that are mostly

formal ones. Vocabulary learning (VL) is an important aspect in teaching English as a second language (L2) courses. According to Schmitt (2008), learning vocabulary is an essential part of mastering an L2 for students, teachers, syllabus designers, and researchers. It has always been one of the most fundamental language components which is a part of all language skills and constitutes the major factor of meaning-based activity. Besides, the acquisition of vocabulary has been recognized to be of great importance in the area of language teaching (Nunan, 1999; Rivers, 1983, Ellis, 2003). In other words, learning lexical items and meaning-bearing items is far more important than other components of language. It is claimed that presenting and learning vocabularies are considered more important than focusing on structural items (Harmer, 2000). Thus, nowadays there is an attempt give enough emphasis to the presentation and practice of the second language lexicon in an appropriate and logical manner.

Teachers should know that language learners enjoy learning vocabulary that they need in speech and writing. This can be undertaken in parallel with the selection of the approaches and procedures that may facilitate the acquisition of the appropriate load of vocabulary they need. In other words, teaching new words has to happen in contrast with approaches that try to teach a language by referring to an out-of-context approach. According to Nunan (1999), "Teaching second language words and expressions has to be carried out in a logical context and in parallel with the appropriate context" (p.65). In other words, we cannot ignore the role of context in teaching the new words. Besides, "Teachers have to refrain from emphasizing linguistic rules and grammar forms which do not serve any functional and immediate need for the rather novice learner in contrast with teaching L2 lexical items" (Ellis, 2003, p. 144).

Since Vocabulary learning is an important part of EFL curriculum in Iran, this thesis explores the role of collaboration in VL in a secondary school in Kerman (Kahnouj), in Iran. Specifically, this thesis is an experimental study that uses a special treatment for one group of learners, whose goal is learning new vocabularies of their school books with partners and the other group who follow the activity in isolation. The research seeks to determine if individual learning versus collaborative learning of the vocabularies have any serious impact on the vocabulary retention of the secondary school learners.

There are different traditional and non-traditional teaching methods and approaches(in the post method era which methods and approaches are combined eclectically) frequently used in l2 instructions which implement old and out of date techniques in order to present new vocabularies. They may include memorization, repetition of words, using dictionary, giving synonyms, translation, fill-in-the-blanks exercises, and so on. Research on vocabulary acquisition has been carried out by investigating vocabulary learning strategies by Chen(2001) and Nation (2001). Among them, most studies have concentrated on some types of strategies and techniques such as using dictionaries, guessing from context, using certain mnemonics like the key words method (Pressley, Levin, & Miller, 1982), using inference from the context (Nation, 1982), using association and the keyword method (Pressley, Levin, & Miller, 1982),using word lists

(Nation, 1982), using guessing (Nation, 2001) and rote repetition (O'Malley & Chomot, 1990).

The study is carried out to achieve certain objectives in following the collaborative approach. First it means to change the teaching approach from teacher-based classroom to students and learners-based class. Second, the findings of this study could perhaps create a new perspective about VL for Iranian EFL learners and teachers where the emphasis is given to the roles of learners, their needs, and learning capacities. Besides, the result of this study can be introduced as a foundation for future researches in this particular area. Although Collaborative Learning Models which means:

A situation in which two or more people learn or attempt to learn something together. Unlike individual learning, people engaged in collaborative learning capitalize on one another's resources and skills (asking one another for information, evaluating one another's ideas, monitoring one another's work, etc.). More specifically, collaborative learning is based on the model that knowledge can be created within a population where members actively interact by sharing experiences and take on asymmetry roles. Put differently, collaborative learning refers to methodologies and environments in which learners engage in a common task where each individual depends on and is accountable to each other. These include both face-to-face conversations and computer discussions (online forums, chat rooms, etc.). Methods for examining collaborative learning processes include conversation analysis and statistical discourse analysis (Wikipedia).

## **Theoretical Framework**

For this study, two frameworks have been utilized. It first of all uses the ideas about the collaborative approach in language teaching. A core aspect of Vygotskian theory is the concept of *zone of proximal development* (ZPD).

The zone of proximal development (ZPD) has been defined as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers" Lev Vygotsky views interaction with peers as an effective way of developing skills and strategies. He suggests that teachers use cooperative learning exercises where less competent children develop with help from more skillful peers - within the zone of proximal development. Vygotsky believed that when a student is in the ZPD for a particular task, providing the appropriate assistance will give the student enough of a "boost" to achieve the task (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86).

## **Research Questions and Hypothesis**

To undertake the study, first we start by asking the following questions and hypotheses that consider the method and the approach having been incorporated in this study:

1. To what extent collaboration facilitate vocabulary retention of the EFL learners?

H0: Collaboration cannot facilitate vocabulary retention of the EFL learners.

2. To what extent can collaboration increase learners' participation in learning activities?

H0: Collaboration cannot increase learners' participation in learning activities.

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

The population of the study was made up of 85 EFL learners in a language institute in Kahnouj. To homogenize the study subjects, an Oxford Placement Test was administered and only those subjects whose score fell one standard deviation above and below the mean were selected for the study. They made a population of 40 subjects who were randomly classified into two groups, each group included 20 female students, aged 15 to 18. They constituted the experimental and control group for the study.

The reason for selecting these learners is based on the idea that they had already received the required instruction to learn basic English words. Learning the new words of their textbooks is an essential part of their educational need and they had to do their best to memorize the words of the lessons they studied. They, therefore, were motivated enough to take part in the activities and build up the subjects of the study whose part of their needs was developing their vocabulary knowledge and word power.

### **Instruments**

Primarily, an Oxford Placement Test was administered to homogenize the study subjects. This test contains 100 items on basic and elementary grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension in the form of multiple choice tests and limited completion tests.

The other instrument was using two sets of vocabulary tests which were used to tap the initial vocabulary knowledge of the learners in both groups: pre and post vocabulary tests. All tests were constructed based on the glossary of the new words that appear at the end of each lesson of their English Books, and they were chosen from the test collection of the textbooks which are normally taught in the language institute. They are supplementary sources that tend to improve the vocabulary knowledge of the learners of English by providing a lot of multiple choice test items.

Each pre and posttest contained 50 items which were constructed in the form of multiple choice tests and were accompanied with an answer sheet, the technique which made the scoring reliable, easy and economical. Also to make sure of the validity of the questions, the tests were given to three colleagues of the researcher. They were asked to read them and tick any irrelevant questions. No irrelevant ones were found. To ensure the test reliability, the researcher used test-retest method. To do so, ten similar learners were asked to answer the questions of the intended tests. After two weeks, the test was

repeated with the same learners. Using Karl Pearson mathematical parameter, the test was proved to be reliable at 0.78.

## **Materials**

The teaching system of the language institute in Kahnouj uses Touchstone series in the language courses. It is a four volume series of books that begins with beginner and continues to book 4 for intermediate learners. For the present study, book 2 was chosen that is designed for elementary language learners. Each section of the book contains topics on listening, reading, writing, vocabulary, and finally free talk. The focus of the study was on the last two parts: vocabulary and free talk. In the first part the learners became familiar with the new words and in the free talk section, they practiced how to use the words in context and in collaboration with others in their conversation with each other.

Since the goal of the study was to assist the EFL learners of the study to enhance their vocabulary retention using cooperation among the subjects in the experimental group, some steps were taken to approach this goal. They used their own text books that contained both free talk activities as well as vocabulary to be learned.

Therefore the same type of material was used for both EG and CG. In other words, the learners in both groups were instructed through the same sources, the same teacher, and the same teaching hours.

## **Design**

The study, being a true experimental study, started with two intact elementary groups of EFL learners in a language institute in Kahnouj. As the nature of experimental studies indicates, two groups of subjects, the pre and posttests as well as the treatment were the most important qualities for the present study. A pre-test including test of vocabulary was taken at the beginning of the course to determine the level of the learners. Subsequently, for the EG, learning began in groups and in cooperation between and among the learners. As an example of the teaching processes, the following steps were taken for the EG:

1. Classifying the subjects in groups and pairs based on certain procedures meaning that higher and more motivated learners were chosen as the head of each group.
2. Stimulating the learners schematic knowledge by the teacher
3. Introducing the new vocabularies by the teacher and discussing their meanings among the group members
4. Beginning free discussion and using the words in the conversation on the given topics
5. Using the new words in the group and in free discussions
6. Checking the subjects understanding of the new words in the group and by the teacher

7. Discussing the meaning of the new words by the teacher and with the help of the groups and individuals

As the teaching processes indicate, the sense of cooperation and cooperative language learning is fostered among the language learners. The learners were encouraged to cooperate closely during the processes of new words teaching and learning. However, as it can moreover be observed, the role given to the teacher is reduced to a coordinator, organizer of the activities and facilitator.

On the other hand, the teaching processes for the CG who tend to learn vocabularies traditionally followed the following steps:

1. The teacher introduced the topic
2. He wrote a list of presumably new words on the board with synonyms and or definitions following each
3. The learners wrote the meanings and later on tried to memorize them
4. Asking questions by the teacher to check the learners knowledge of the new words

As the teaching processes indicate with the CG, this group receives instruction from the teacher. In fact, the teacher is viewed to be the class manager, organizer, and the coordinator. He also monitors the learners in various ways and tries to describe the points, discuss ideas on his own, and provide the learners with any idea belonging to the teaching of the new words. The experiment for both groups last two months, all together 15 sessions. The same instructor, materials and teaching hours were used for both EG and CG.

### **Data collection and Analysis Procedures**

The data of the experiment was based on the pre and post test scores. The researcher applied T-student test as a parameter to discover any difference between the performances of the two groups from pre to post test and if any of the groups had outperformed the other. The other parameter, reliability of the test, was also estimated. Besides, the Spearman Correlation(In statistics, Spearman's rank correlation coefficient or Spearman's rho, named after Charles Spearman and often denoted by the Greek letter ( $\rho$ ) or as  $r_s$ , is a nonparametric measure of statistical dependence between two variables. ) was implemented to discover any meaningful relationship between the two pre and posttest of each group.

In order to examine the research hypotheses, the researcher used both descriptive and inferential statistics (Mathematical methods that employ probability for deducing (inferring) the properties of a population from the analysis of the properties of a data sample drawn from it. It is concerned also with the precision and reliability of the inferences it helps to draw). The researcher used an independent T-student test to analyze the difference between the means of the two groups regarding their score on vocabulary retention.

## RESULTS

As it was stated before, the goal of the study was to investigate the influence of incorporating a collaborative approach to improve and facilitate the vocabulary acquisition of the EFL learners of the study. To this purpose, two groups of EFL learners participated in the experiment being instructed using two different approaches. All conditions for teaching the learners were controlled and treated almost in the same way. This chapter presents the required information about the pre and posttests of vocabulary for both EG and CG groups. It will also present the T-value tests and the coefficient correlation of the two pre and posttests.

### One-tailed Tables

One-tailed Tables means: A statistical test in which the critical area of a distribution is one-sided so that it is either greater than or less than a certain value, but not both. If the sample that is being tested falls into the one-sided critical area, the alternative hypothesis will be accepted instead of the null hypothesis. The one-tailed test gets its name from testing the area under one of the tails (sides) of a normal distribution, although the test can be used in other non-normal distributions as well. Table 1 demonstrates the information about the pretest for CG. As it can be understood, the students participated in the examination is 20 for both pre and posttest. On the other hand, as the means of the two tests indicate, the mean for the pretest CG is calculated to be 12.80 while this changes to 14.20 for the posttest. Here the mean of the final score increases. It can potentially reveal the effect of the procedure used by the teacher. Besides, the similar standard deviations of the two tests can be an indication of homogeneous scoring and level of the group from pre to posttest of CG.

**Table 1.** One-Sample Statistics for pretest CG

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pretest cg	20	12.8000	1.10501	.24709
Posttest cg	20	14.2000	1.60918	.35982

Table 2 demonstrates the information about the pretest for EG. As it can be understood, the number of the students participated in the examination is 20 for both pre and posttest of EG. On the other hand, as the means of the two tests indicate, the mean for the pretest EG is calculated to be 12.95 while this changes to 15.95 for the posttest. Here the mean of the final score increases significantly. It can clearly reveal the effect of collaboration on the vocabulary improvement of the EFL learners of the study who were exposed to this type of procedure. The standard deviation for the two tests is almost similar without much difference. In other words, the two groups benefitted from homogeneity in the scoring procedures.

**Table 2.** One-Sample Statistics for pretest EG

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pretest eg	20	12.9500	1.87715	.41974
Posttest eg	20	15.9500	1.66938	.37329

On the other hand, table 3 presents the information about the t-value test, or the significance of the study. As it can be seen, the table t for the two pre and posttest is calculated to be 51.8 and 39.46 respectively at 19 degree of freedom. The relative significance of the two tests is .000 for both tests that is an indication of perfect relationship between the two tests.

**Table 3.** Two-tailed test for pretest CG

	Test Value = 0					
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Pretest cg	51.803	19	.000	12.80000	12.2828	13.3172
Posttest cg	39.464	19	.000	14.20000	13.4469	14.9531

Moreover, table 4 presents the information about the t-value test, or the degree of significance of the two tests. As it can be seen, the table t for the two pre and posttest is calculated to be 30.85 and 42.72 for both pre and posttest of EG at 19 degree of freedom. The relative significance of the two tests is .000 for both tests that is an indication of perfect relationship between the two tests since  $\text{Sig} = .000 < .05$ .

**Table 4.** One-Sample Test for Pretest EG

	Test Value = 0					
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Pretest eg	30.852	19	.000	12.95000	12.0715	13.8285
Posttest eg	42.729	19	.000	15.95000	15.1687	16.7313

Table 5 below shows the overall information about the means and SD of all tests of both groups. The difference between the means of the two groups in terms of their pretest that was taken before the instruction had begun and the posttest which started after the instruction had come to an end. Besides, the SD for all tests circles around the unity, 1.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Based on the data in chapter four, the first hypothesis is rejected. The data in the previous section and the difference between the mean scores of the pre and posttest proved that the EG improved more satisfactorily in the collaborative and group-work. Based on the total mean score for the pretest of the EG, it was estimated to be 12.95 while it increased to 15.95 for the posttest of the same group. However, the standard deviation of the two groups did not change significantly. This is the criterion that signals more homogeneity of the group from pretest to posttest. In other words, the subjects performance from pre to posttest approaches homogeneity. The standard error of measurement has also decreased to .373 from .419. On the other hand, the estimated coefficient correlation of the two tests is estimated to be .772, with degree of significance of .000. The relevant correlation is not very high but somehow acceptable but the  $\text{sig} = .000 < .05$ . The equation shows the meaningful relationship between the two pre and posttests for the EG.



On the other hand, the second hypothesis is also rejected. It was proved that collaboration could increase participation in the learning processes. In other words, it was made clear that the progress in the scores for the posttest can be an indication of active participation of the learners in the group. In other words, it can be confirmed that more participation can lead to more learning and improvement in the acquisition of the L2 vocabulary. To support the idea, the above discussion can be attributed to this claim, too. In other words, it can be confirmed that based on the achieved data mentioned in the previous chapter, the participants in the CG did not benefit from the individual teaching processes as much as the learners in EG. In other words, the learners in the CG in spite of depending on the teacher and his assistance in various level of vocabulary presentation did not improve as satisfactorily as the EG and thus were left behind the EG.

Considering the results of the two groups, it can be concluded that learning in an individual environment can't be as effective as learning in a collaborative one. Data from this study showed that the difference in growth in vocabulary knowledge was statistically significant, because the collaborative group showed a significantly higher amount of growth in vocabulary knowledge compared to the individual group. Working together in a collaborative environment and creating an interactive process in the vocabulary learning can cause better retention of vocabularies among the students.

This is true for the participants of this research but can be the same for other students in other schools at the same age too. It's better for the second year language instructors to consider making use of collaborative techniques in order to enhance their own students' development in knowledge of the vocabularies.

Based on the achieved results, it was proved that collaborative language learning can facilitate the process of vocabulary acquisition. Regarding the goal of the study, enough emphasis was given to the role of the learners by exposing them to group and collaborative work. The result showed improvement in the vocabulary development of the learners in the EG more than that of the CG.

It has to be noticed that the leading model of learning language skills in the second language classrooms has so far been the individual learning model which is associated with traditional second language instruction. In the traditional teaching methods, the role and basic qualities of the learners are ignored and the teacher role is emphasized over the learners. Based on the achieved results, regarding the goal of the study, the required focus was given to the active role of the learners in order to use their cognitive mental abilities to learn the L2 vocabularies more feasibly than the traditional methods (Laal & Ghodsi, 2011; Nemati, 2010).

As discussed before, research findings have so far shown numerous individual benefits resulting from an integration of collaborative learning into pedagogical approaches. "The individual learner who transitions into a collaborative learning environment experiences more control over his/her learning", (Sharan 1990, p 20). In the present study, it was concluded when the individual learner transitions into a collaborative

learning environment, he was given a complete responsibility to deal with the problem posed to him, whether learning a single new word or getting him to make a novel sentence with the learned words. Besides, it can be discussed that collaborative learning obviously encouraged the learners to ask the questions they didn't know without feeling shy in front of the teacher or the class, explain and justify their opinions to the extent they could, articulate their reasoning as far as they had the required knowledge to do it, and elaborate and reflect upon their knowledge.

It can be claimed that one great achievement of the study is changing the teaching approach from teacher-centered classes to learner-centered classes where collaboration is an essential part of the learning processes. In other words, it can be confirmed that collaboration in nature supports the idea that L2 language learners are independent and developing autonomy in the language class can foster this aspect of language learning.

The achieved results are in line with the new teaching approaches such as community language learning, communicative language learning, the total physical response and other recent methods where learners are regarded as independent in nature and to learn better, they have to develop this own self criteria.

Besides, the results of the study are compatible with the similar studies carried out in other countries and other similar context for the same purposes, some of which are Gokhale (1995), Stacey (1999), Slusser& Erickson (2006), Slusser& Erickson (2006), Jones (2000, 2006) and Lin, Chan & Hsiao (2011). All of the cited studies confirmed strongly that collaboration can suitably lead to more and effective vocabulary acquisition as well as developing the motivational level of the earners for more classroom participation.

Another important outcome of the study is encouraging self-centeredness as an important principle not only for vocabulary acquisition, but for language learning in general. The learners have to know that language learning entails a cognitive and meaningful activity and they have to develop their self-criteria for more successful learning. The study was almost successful to help them develop this ability.

## **PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS**

The intent of this study has been to examine the impact of two different learning styles on the development of vocabulary knowledge. Because the data were derived from a representative sample of learners in an EFL secondary school setting, inferences could be made about the potential effects of the two learning styles on larger populations of second language learners studying in higher educational EFL contexts. It is the goal of this section to suggest how findings from this research may be used to generate real-world applications in second language vocabulary instruction.

One important implication that can be drawn involves the selection of an appropriate learning style to yield increased development of vocabulary knowledge. Data from this study show that the difference in the growth of vocabulary knowledge was statistically

significant based on the learning style in which the participants completed the collaborative tasks.

It should be mentioned that the interactive communicative process involved in completing the task may not have been the sole source of increased vocabulary knowledge among collaborative learners. The growth in vocabulary knowledge may have been brought about by a range of other relevant contributing factors. Perhaps one reason for the increased growth in vocabulary knowledge among collaborative learners was learners' sense of shared responsibility to complete the task, possibly causing an increased degree of engagement with and internalization of the target vocabulary. Whatever the reason for the increased growth in the collaborative treatment group, second language instructors should consider incorporating cooperative learning activities into their vocabulary instruction to provide greater engagement with the language.

The other implication relates to task design. One implication for second language teachers is to create tasks which are suitably challenging for the learners. Because collaborative learning environments involve partners in brainstorming, planning, negotiating, developing and revising content related to the assigned task, learners are capable of accomplishing more challenging tasks than they would if completing the tasks alone.

As a consequence, instructors using collaboration in the classrooms should create activities that have higher expectations. Though the specific implications from this study will be best applied to higher educational EFL settings with advanced language learners, adaptations could be made to suit the needs of learners of varying levels of English language proficiency, native language backgrounds, ages and environments of study (ESL or EFL) to effectively promote vocabulary knowledge.

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