

## **A Meticulous Look at Long's (1981) Interaction Hypothesis: Does It Have Any Effect on Speaking Skill?**

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### **Abstract**

The current study tried to investigate the role of interaction hypothesis proposed by Michael Long (1981) in the development of speaking skills of 60 Iranian EFL students studying in a private English language institute. In a quantitative research method, the speaking skill of the participants was assessed before and immediately after the English course to get a deeper insight about the role of interaction in enhancing their speaking skill. The data were analyzed through SPSS version 25 and were presented in the form of descriptive and inferential statistics. Findings of the study indicated that interactive activities played a significant role in the classroom since students were able to improve their speaking skill in the classroom atmosphere. The analysis also confirmed notable concern over employing learner-learner interaction instructions in the developing of speaking skill. The pedagogical implications of the findings suggested the need to include communicative language teaching materials which help language learners practice language in the hope of progressing their speaking abilities through the interactions that take place among language learners in the classroom.

**Keywords:** Long's (1981) interaction hypothesis, Learner-learner interaction, speaking skill

### **INTRODUCTION**

The mastery of speaking skills in language has become a priority for many second or foreign language learners. Consequently, language learners often evaluate their success in language learning as well as the effectiveness of their language course on the basis of how well they feel they have improved in their spoken language proficiency (Richards, 2005). Further, many researchers maintain that speaking is one of the four key and pivotal skills of language that should be developed since the ability to communicate effectively benefits L2 learners by gaining self-confidence and improve performance in the rest of the language skills (Namaziandost & Ahmadi, 2019; Nasri & Biria, 2017). In addition, the significance of mastering speaking skills of the target language arises when the language learners realize the impact it would have on the success of their future careers. Learners realize that they need to practice the target language regularly in the

classroom in order to overcome shyness and hesitation (Namaziandost, Rahimi Esfahani, & Hashemifardnia, 2018; Taous, 2013).

The lack of interaction or the use of the language will negatively affect language learners in their communications. Therefore, language learners should be encouraged to participate in the acute interaction that takes place in the classroom so that they can be fluent and well-versed in spoken language (Mackey, 2007; Nasri & Biria, 2017).

Interaction in the classroom refers to the conversation between teachers and students in which active participation and learning becomes vital because conversations are part of the socio-cultural activities through which students construct knowledge collaboratively. In the process of learning English as a foreign language, classroom interaction has been considered an important factor in order to experience real communicative situations in which the learner can learn how to express their own views and opinions, moreover, they will develop their oral fluency and accuracy which are essential for the success of foreign language communication. As Tsui (1995) express: "in the language classroom, be it first, second or foreign language, classroom language and interaction are even more important because language is at once the subject of study as well as the medium for learning" (p. 12). Classroom interaction then, is necessary and useful as a strategy to enhance learning because it creates opportunities for the learners to develop their knowledge and their skills. Speaking is the productive skill in the oral mode, which has been one of the main skills that students need to develop in order to achieve successful communication. There is thus a vital relationship between interaction and the development of the speaking skill because thanks to it, the human beings are able to exchange thoughts, feelings, or ideas, so, interaction involves a reciprocal action which encourages students to use the L2 language as a mutual understanding device. In some cases, learners present a low speaking proficiency level in English because their lack of knowledge of the target language which is related to several factors including the lack of better pedagogical strategies. Following the previous ideas and considering the teachers' and learners' needs, the purpose of the present study is to show the importance of the role of classroom interaction as a necessary and useful strategy to enhance the speaking skill. All of this to provide L2 teachers and learners with useful information that can help them to improve some aspects in the process of English learning and teaching considering the EFL contexts characteristics (Namaziandost, Nasri, & Rahimi Esfahani, 2019).

Nowadays, lot of Iranian EFL learners face difficulties during their learning of English within the classroom environment, speaking in a fluent and accurate way is their main concern. Foreign language teachers must be aware of how to create an interactive classroom atmosphere to enable learners to practice the language. The problem raised in this work is specifically about how interaction in the classroom may improve students' oral production and their ability to communicate effectively and spontaneously using the English language in different interactive situations.

The concepts of classroom interaction and oral proficiency have been a matter of great interest for many researchers and scholars, particularly educationists of second and foreign languages. Subsequently they have done continuous researches and studies in the field of language teaching and learning investigating the subject of interaction as a

conclusive goal for effective learning and teaching in the classroom. In accordance with that, the significance of this study is basically about how important and influential is classroom interaction in promoting opportunities for teachers to create an interactive learning context to enable learners to be attached and exposed more to the language because classroom interaction can facilitate students' language development by its contribution in providing target language practice opportunities (Namaziandost, Abedi, & Nasri, 2019). Furthermore, it helps in co-constructing learners' self and cognitive development. In the classroom the process of negotiation involved in interaction is itself to be identified with the process of language learning. As well as in classroom both teachers and learners can create the learning opportunities which motivate the students' interests and potential to communicate with others.

### **THIS STUDY**

The present study has certain objectives and purposes that may be reached at the end of this research. This work aims at investigating the improvement of students' oral production through classroom interaction, and to explain how effective classroom interaction in EFL classes is important.

This study addresses the following research question.

- Do interactive activities have any significant effect on the development of speaking skills of language Iranian EFL learners?

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **Importance of Speaking Skills**

In the traditional methods of teaching language, the speaking skills had been neglected massively whereas much attention had been paid on writing and reading skills. The Grammar-Translation method is a good example of that claim. In spite of the fact that speaking skill is crucially important for language learners to converse and communicate, much attention has been paid to other elements of language (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). In addition, of all the four skills of language, speaking is seen as the most important skill because people who claim to know a language, they intend to claim that they are able to speak the language (Namaziandost, Abedi, & Nasri, 2019). Further, many language learners give preference to speaking skill since they believe that if they master the speaking skill, they are seen as speakers of the language. Most importantly, the main question that most language learners are asked about is "do you speak English?" not "do you write English?" Therefore, the vast majority of language learners attempt to focus on mastering the speaking skill, as they feel that this will assist them in finding jobs in their future careers. In this regard, Baker and Westrup (2003) argue that learners who can speak English fluently, might have greater chances for employment.

#### **Long's (1981) Interaction Hypothesis**

Long (1981), formulated the Interaction Hypothesis which forms the basic argument for the conversational interaction in language teaching and learning, in which language learners' access to comprehensible input, opportunities for outcome and correction in

the form of conversation among one another. According to the Interaction Hypothesis, language learners negotiate in meaning which is the process of engaging in interaction in order for learners to concentrate on form and process of the input they obtain. Thus, the Interaction Hypothesis suggests that interaction between a non-native speaker and a native speaker or among non-native speakers creates acute second/foreign language acquisition environment where learners learn through negotiation of meaning. Furthermore, research has shown that input alone is not as effective as interactional modified input in helping language teaching and learning (Namaziandost, Rahimi Esfahani, Nasri, & Mirshekaran, 2018; Namaziandost, Abdi Saray, & Rahimi Esfahani, 2018; Wang & Castro, 2010). Thus, the Interaction Hypothesis plays a central role in learning through conversational interaction on improving language learners' speaking skills.

Spoken language usually has two functions: interactional and transactional. The essential goal of the former is to keep social relationships, but that of the latter is to pass information and ideas. Because much of our daily communication is interactional, being able to interact is imperative. Thus, language instructors should facilitate learners with meaningful communicative situations about proper topics by applying learner-learner interaction as the key to teach communicative language (Namaziandost, Fatahi, & Shafiee, 2019; Richards & Renandya, 2002). Communication drives essentially from interaction (Rivers, 1987). Classroom communication includes meaning-focused activity and learners can learn how to listen and talk to others, how to negotiate meaning in shared context both verbally and non-verbally with the help of teacher (Namaziandost, Hashemifardnia, & Shafiee, 2019). Nunan (1989) expounds that in order to design activities; teachers need to take into consideration the integration of four language skills as they interact with each other in natural behavior, because in real life situations as in the classroom, most tasks of any complexity involve more than one macro skill.

### **Importance of classroom talk and interaction**

The classroom talk is required for students to improve their speaking skills. It is visible that most students' do not engage in an interaction by themselves unless the teachers' start first. Now students are given more space to communicate whether with teacher or with peers than teacher talking duration. Class time should not be dominated by the teachers', (Namaziandost, Saberi Dehkordi, & Shafiee, 2019; Gass & Selinker, 2008) because this will give students' less time if teachers spend too much time on explaining topics and giving instructions. Burns and Myhill (2004) also add that with many of the teachers' statements concerned that rather than an interactive whole class teaching it comes up with a transmissive model of teaching, rather. So, talking itself is not being considered as interaction.

### **Classroom Interaction in developing speaking skills**

Speaking skills require some experience and practice. It is a complex process of sending and receiving messages through the use of verbal expressions and it also involves nonverbal symbols such as gesture and facial expressions. Hedge (2000) defines speaking as "a skill by which they (people) are judged while first impressions are being formed."

In the communicative approach, speaking was importance because oral communication involves communication where learners are expected to interact orally with other people. Moreover, the teachers' talk will be reduced; that is to say learners are reinforced to talk more in the classroom. In this approach, the fluency and accuracy are the main characteristics, and they are balancing in achieving a given task. So, the ultimate aim of learning a second language in classrooms will be the acquisition of the speaking skills, i.e. the ability to speak appropriately and confidently. However, learners may find difficulties in taking parts in interactions. In our country practicing the English speaking outside the classroom is not always possible that's why classroom interaction is important to develop speaking skills. Additionally, practice activities may serve the goal of speaking proficiency.

### **Previous Studies on Learner-learner Interaction**

In another study, Kouicem (2010) explored the role of interaction that takes place among students in the classroom on developing learners' speaking skills. The study adopted questionnaire among language learners and teachers to establish if interaction in classroom can be helpful in promoting speaking skills of students. The results of the study accentuated that both teachers and learners emphasized that interaction among students in the classroom setting helped learners in enhancing their speaking skills. The study also displayed that teaching based on interaction in the classroom can be the best pedagogical strategy in language development, in particular verbal language development.

Moreover, Luan and Sappathy (2011) investigated the role of negotiated interaction between learners on the ability to retain vocabulary items among a group of students. 48 students participated in the study in one-way input which involved the traditional way of teaching where the teacher used translations and grammar to teach vocabulary. 24 of the participants took part in an interactive task where the students experienced interactive activities. All the 48 students sat for a pretest and three posttests. The results of the study presented that the students who negotiated in the two-way task obtained higher vocabulary scores since negotiated interaction proved to be beneficial for students in retaining vocabulary items. In short, research has generally shown that teaching methods in which interactive activities are involved have greater effect on the development of speaking skills of language learners.

Mohammadi, Gorjian, and Pzhakh (2014) have demonstrated that the possible impact of classroom structure on the speaking skills of Iranian EFL learners. They studied learners' performance in aggressive, cooperative or individualistic environment. For this purpose, they selected 160 male pre-university students in Mathematics. They selected 120 participants randomly, who were divided into four groups. All experimental groups were taught English in General Purpose (EGP), but control group practiced in the classroom environment. The findings provided evidence that experimental groups were better than the control group; it means classroom structure has special impact on speaking skill. The result showed that there was not any special contrast between aggressive, cooperative or individualistic.

Azadi and Azizifar (2015) posited that one of the most significant discussions on speaking is to transport the messages to the others, and it is necessary to have the ability to communicate adequately. Classroom interaction has a vital role in improving speaking ability. For this purpose, they considered the effect of teaching speaking strategies and learners' gender on developing speaking skill. They studied 30 intermediate language learners and used posttest and pretest design to analyze the research questions. The results showed that the classroom interaction is the way of improving the learners' speaking skill and gender has no effect on their speaking performance. Organizing the classroom so that it dedicates most of the class time to student's interaction and promoting conversation between them can be a good way of encouraging classroom interaction.

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

This study included 60 intermediate students as its participants; they were chosen among 90 students at a private English language institutes in Iran. All of these students were male, ranging in age from 14-20. Their level of English language proficiency was determined on the basis of their scores on the Oxford Placement Test (OPT). The learners were randomly divided into two equal groups of 30- experimental and control.

### **Instruments**

The first instrument which was utilized in the present study to homogenize the participants was a proficiency test. This test was Oxford Placement Test (OPT) which was answered by all the participants in the current study. It helped the researcher to choose the intermediate students; those who score between 40 to 47 were determined as the intermediate level. The second and the most important instrument for gathering information to answer the question raised in the current study was a researcher-made speaking pre-test which was designed based on the students' course book and the activities which were carried out in the study. It included 40 multiple-choice items. Reliability and validity of the mentioned pretest was measured. After constructing the test, it was checked by five English experts for its face and content validity. That is, to get sure about the Content Validity Index of the test items, five experienced English teachers read through the tests and made some changes regarding the clarity, simplicity and the representativeness of items. Then, the test was piloted on a similar group in another institute whose course book and level were the same. Its reliability was calculated through KR-21 formula and it was ( $r=0.899$ ).

The third instrument which was utilized in this study was a researcher-made vocabulary post-test- a modified version of the pre-test was used as the post-test. It was given to the participants to measure the impacts of the treatment on their speaking improvement. Speaking skill results of pretest and posttest were taken to present the development of the learners' speaking skills in the classroom through learner-learner interaction during the course of the instructions at the Language Center.

## Data Collection Procedures

In the first step, 90 Iranian EFL learners from a private English language institute, Khuzestan, Iran was selected. Then, the OPT test was distributed among them. After answering OPT test, 60 intermediate students were chosen as the target population of the study. Then, they were randomly divided into two equal groups- experimental and control. They were pre-tested by a researcher-made speaking test. Then, the treatment was practiced on both groups. As the treatment, the experimental group received interactive activities via learner-learner interaction and the control group received traditional instruction. Students in the experimental group learned through their participation in the attainment of knowledge by gathering information and processing it by solving problems and articulating what they have discovered. Each activity below provides students with opportunities to deepen their learning by applying concepts and articulating new knowledge and many of these activities also provide the instructor feedback about the students' learning. The following interactive student activities were three of the most effective ways to encourage more speech in your classroom.

### 1. Think, pair, and share

Set a problem or a question around a certain topic, and pair up your students. Give each pair of students enough time so they can reach a proper conclusion, and permit the kids to share their conclusion in their personal voice. This way your students will be engaged, communicating, and remember more of the class than ever before.

### 2. Brainstorming

Interactive brainstorming was mostly performed in group sessions. The process was useful for generating creative thoughts and ideas. Brainstorming helped students learn to work together, and above all, learn from each other.

### 3. Buzz session

Participants come together in session groups that focus on a single topic. Within each group, every student contributes thoughts and ideas. Encourage discussion and collaboration among the students within each group. Everyone should learn from each other's input and experiences. As a teacher, you could give your students some keywords to spark the conversation.

Of course, there are many other interactive teaching ideas as well. I split up the activities in different categories: Individual student activities; Student pair activities; Student group activities; and Interactive game activities

The treatment lasted 15 sessions of 60 minutes each under the guidance of the supervisor. In the first session, the purposes and procedures of the study was explained to the students and then OPT was administered. In the second session, the participants of both groups were pre-tested. In the twelve next sessions, the treatment was applied. The teacher, the course book and the allotted time for both groups were the same. Then, in the fifteenth session, both groups took the researcher-made speaking post-test. Finally, the gathered data were analyzed accordingly.

## Data Analysis

After gathering the data through the above-stated instruments, first of all, the normality of distribution was investigated. For checking the normality, Kolmogorov-Smirnov (K-S) test was used. Then, one-way ANCOVA was run to analyze the data.

## RESULTS

### Results of Normality Tests

Before conducting any analyses on the proficiency test, pretest, and posttest, it was necessary to check the normality of the distributions. Thus, Kolmogorov-Smirnov test of normality was run on the data obtained from the above-mentioned tests. The results are shown in Table 1:

**Table 1.** Normality Test for the Scores of Pretest, and Post-test

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov <sup>a</sup>		
	Statistic	df	Sig.
Experimental. pretest	.218	30	.12
Experimental posttest	.258	30	.20
Control pretest	.193	30	.13
Control posttest	.233	30	.09

The *p* values under the *Sig.* column in Table 1 determine whether the distributions were normal or not. A *p* value greater than .05 shows a normal distribution, while a *p* value lower than .05 indicates that the distribution has not been normal. Since all the *p* values in Table 1 were larger than .05, it could be concluded that the distributions of scores for the proficiency test, pretest, and posttest obtained from male and female learners had been normal. It is thus safe to proceed with parametric test (i.e. paired samples *t*-test and ANCOVA in this case) and make further comparisons between the participating groups.

### Results for the Research Question

As the main research question of the study was intended to figure out whether using interactive activities have any significant effect on the development of speaking skills of language Iranian EFL learners, the posttest scores of the EG and CG learners had to be compared. To attain this objective, the researcher could run an independent-samples *t* test, but to control for any possible pre-existing differences between these two subgroups, and compare their post-test scores accordingly, one-way ANCOVA was chosen to be conducted:

**Table 2.** Descriptive Statistics for Comparing the Post-test Scores of the EG and CG Learners

Groups	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Experimental Group	16.0333	1.88887	30
Control Group	13.7833	.82716	30
Total	14.9083	1.83767	60

In Table 2, it could be found that the post-test mean score of the EG learners ( $M = 16.0333$ ) was larger than the post-test mean score of the CG learners ( $M = 13.7833$ ). To

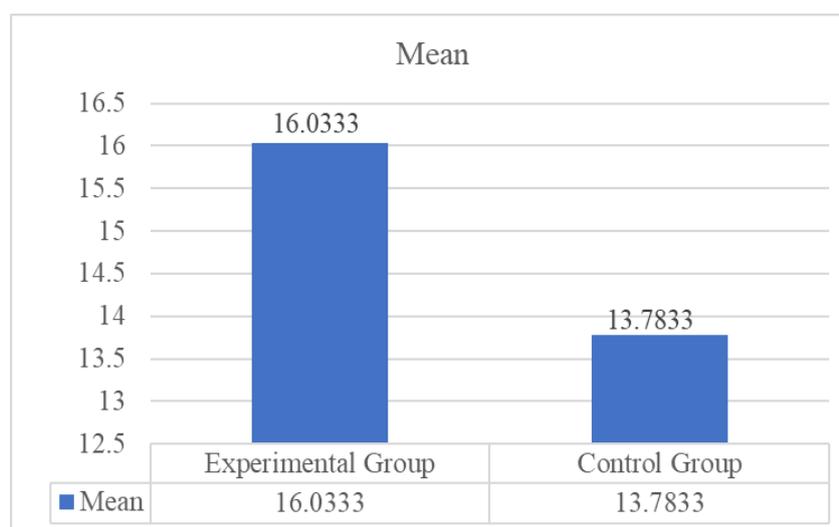
find out whether this difference was a statistically significant one or not, the researcher had to look down the *Sig.* column and in front of the Groups row in Table 3:

**Table 3.** Results of One-Way ANCOVA for Comparing the Post-test Scores of the EG and CG Learners

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	138.268 <sup>a</sup>	2	69.134	64.624	.000	.694
Intercept	.870	1	.870	.814	.371	.014
Pretest	62.331	1	62.331	58.265	.142	.000
Groups	101.339	1	101.339	94.728	.000	.624
Error	60.978	57	1.070			
Total	13534.750	60				
Corrected Total	199.246	59				

In Table 3, if you find the row labeled Groups in the leftmost column, and read across this row, under the *Sig.* column, you can find the *p* value, which should be compared with the alpha level of significance (i.e., .05). The *p* value here was lower than the alpha level of significance ( $.00 < .05$ ), which indicates that the difference between the two groups of EG ( $M = 16.0333$ ) and CG ( $M = 13.7833$ ) on the speaking post-test was statistically significant. This means that using the interactive activities could significantly improve the speaking ability of the EG learners.

Another noteworthy piece of information in Table 3 is the effect size value, shown under the Partial Eta Squared column in front of Groups. This value equaled .624, which means that the treatment (i.e., using the interactive activities) accounted for 62% of the difference between the EG and CG learners. The existence of a significant difference between the speaking post-test scores of the EG and CG learners is graphically represented in Figure 1 below:



**Figure 1.** Posttest Mean Scores of the EG and CG Learners

Figure 1 shows that the EG learners considerably outperformed the CG learners on the speaking posttest, indicating that the interactive activities had significant effects on Iranian EFL learners' speaking ability.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The focus of the current research study was to examine the role of learner-learner interaction in the development of speaking skills of EFL students who attended an intensive English course at a private English language institute in Iran. Findings of the study suggested that students tended to improve their speaking skills after participating in the English course for three and a half months. The results of the study revealed that learner-learner interaction had a remarkable effect on enhancing speaking ability of language learners. Additionally, the participants of the study who studied English language based on interactive class activities during the course of study, scored much higher in posttest over the pretest. Findings of the study also indicated that meaningful interaction between students was a significant factor for developing speaking skills.

Through the results of posttest over pretest reported in this study, students interacted in English among themselves and this was a remarkable factor behind their speaking competency development. The results also showed that the students supported each other by participating in the interactions that took place inside the classroom. More importantly, the results presented that interactional classroom activities such as free discussions, repeated interactions and presentations assisted them in enhancing their speaking skills throughout the course of the study.

As the analysis demonstrated in this current study, repeated learner-learner interaction played a central role in helping the students promote their ability in speaking the target language more powerfully and successfully and aided them in language development. Most interestingly, through the results of the posttest, it can be claimed that the students did most of the interactions that took place in the classroom which enabled them develop language competence, in particular speaking skills by the end of the course. Therefore, it is believed that learner-learner interaction has a positive effect and can be said to be the driving force for enhancing speaking skills of the language learners. In short, the results of this research study prove the important role of interaction between the students during the period of the intensive course.

The findings achieved in this study seem to confirm the findings of previous studies which proved the prominent role of learner-learner interaction in the development of oral language development. These findings confirm are in line with the findings obtained by Cotter (2007) who found that language learners are able to improve their verbal language ability through practicing the target language. The study also showed that if input and interaction are available for language learners in the classroom, language learners will consider language as a tool for social interaction. The findings of this current study are also consistent with the findings obtained by Kouicem (2010) who found that the best way to develop speaking skills of students is to massively motivate them to involve in verbal interactions among the students inside classroom. These findings are also in line with the findings achieved by Luan and Sappathy (2011) who found that learners who negotiated for meaning achieved higher vocabulary scores and negotiated interaction proved to be helpful in enabling students to acquire vocabulary items more effectively.

The current study found that Iranian EFL students were able to improve their speaking skills through classroom interaction during the course of the study. This shows that learner-learner interaction plays an important role in enhancing speaking skills of second language learners. The current study also found that the best way to effectively produce language is to encourage students to participate in verbal interaction inside classroom. Additionally, this current study showed that repeated learner-learner interaction in the classroom setting was the best factor to develop students' speaking skills and reduce their mistakes during a conversation. More importantly, this research study confirmed that classroom aided the students to practice the target language through learner-learner interaction. Hence, it can be concluded that interaction between students in the classroom environment is crucially effective for L2 development, in particular verbal language development. This study also signified that it was learner-learner interaction in the classroom which enhanced the students' speaking skills. As a result, language teachers should take into their consideration that they need to include in their language classes meaningful interactional activities that encourage student participation, which in turn would assist the development of the learners' speaking skills in the classroom (Namaziandost & Rahimi Esfahani, 2018). This study has employed a quantitative research method due to limited constraint. Therefore, it is recommended that in order to get a deeper insight into the issue of learner-learner interaction in promoting speaking skills of language learners, adopting a mixed-method should be considered.

In short, the present study signifies that classroom interaction is necessary to develop students' speaking skills because it provides opportunities for learners to practice their speaking skills in the classroom as they don't find opportunity to practice it outside the classroom. Most teachers' and students confirm their awareness of classroom interaction to develop their speaking skills. It is the teacher's responsibility to provide more time for communicative activities to increase students' talk time. Therefore, teaching behavior should be improved for maximizing students' learning. The results obtained from the study lead us to draw the following suggestions and recommendations for teachers' and future research.

- The study shows the divergence relationship between language teachers' belief and actual practice which is clearly found from the research data. Here teachers are aware of classroom interaction but the actual practice is absent. Teachers' still controls all of the teaching learning activities. This research can help teachers to identify their own teaching behavior and can change their teaching style which will help learners to develop speaking skills.
- Moreover, the time allocation for communication activity should be increased and various activity should be included by the teachers' so that students can conduct it in a stress free and relaxed environment. Also, positive environment is necessary to motivate students', so that they can communicate frequently without anxiety and shyness.
- Therefore, the communicative activity or pair/group work will increase opportunity for learning output because in teacher-learners' interaction students'

only respond but in pair/group work they initiate more which may give rise of English-speaking skills.

- Furthermore, future research can be conducted by including more universities and information for questionnaire survey sample, conduct more interview of English language teachers' and do more classroom observation to get the real scenario of the field.

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