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School General English Achievement and Group-Work: An Investigation among Iranian Junior High School Students

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Abstract

The present study investigated school general English achievement and group work among Iranian junior high school students. The main question this study tried to answer was whether group work could enhance a higher general English achievement among junior high school students. To answer this question, 60 female learners were divided into experimental and control group randomly with 30 members in each after administering a general English test to 100 Junior high school females to release qualified intermediate learners. Then, the experimental group was broken into 6 groups including 4 learners in each to work cooperatively while the control group went on working conventionally. Firstly, each group received general English test such as reading, listening, writing, and speaking as pretest to figure out their current level. Then as treatment, experimental group took practices in all skills in group while the control group received a placebo. The students were asked to do the posttest. The average was taken to indicate students overall English language achievement of method of instruction in the general English course. By analyzing the scores of each single group on their posttest (Independent samples T-test) and also analyzing pretest to posttest scores of experimental and control group (Paired sample T-test), the null hypothesis of the study was rejected. It meant that the group work had a better performance in terms of the general English posttest.

Keywords: group work, cooperative learning, EFL Learner, general English

1. Introduction

The teaching of English as a foreign language is now one of the most important subjects in most Iranian junior high schools. The implementation of English has brought along the need to establish clear objectives that are different to the ones traditionally assigned to secondary schools. The goal of this study is to investigate school general English achievement and group work among Iranian junior high school students. This paper looks at theoretical framework because theories of group learning tend to focus on how group learning is different from individual learning. In the second part, statement of the problem is discussed that investigates general English achievement problems. In this regard, group counselors need to know whether their groups are effective at helping clients achieve their goals and how a group can be improved. It is also important to know whether the group was implemented as planned, because this affects its outcomes. Thus, evaluation helps group leaders determine the success of their groups. When learners work in a group, they share their assumptions and they help each other in a positive way. The third part of this study takes into account the research question. The fourth part deals with hypothesis of the study. The other parts are methodology, data analysis and findings, results of the study, implications, and suggestions for further research respectively.

2. Theoretical Framework

According to Bransford et al. (2000), many people who had difficulty in school might have prospered in their learning had the new ideas about effective instructional practices been available at the time. Furthermore, even those who did well in traditional educational environments might have developed skills, knowledge, and attitudes that would have

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significantly enhanced their achievements. Group work can succeed or fail based on how you incorporate it into the rest of the class and the course. Students need to see how their work in small groups was useful to them and/or contributed to the development of the topic. Thus, end with a plenary session in which students do group reporting: How group reporting is done "can make the difference between students' feeling that they are just going through their paces and the sense that they are engaged in a powerful exchange of ideas" (Brookfield & Preskill, 1999, p. 107).

As students do their work, circulate among the groups and answer any questions raised. Also listen for trends that are emerging from the discussions, so that you can refer to them during the subsequent plenary discussion. However, be unobtrusive and avoid interfering with group functioning; allow time for students to solve their own problems before getting involved. Even consider leaving the room for a short period of time, because your absence can increase students' willingness to share uncertainties and however, according to Christison, implementation of CL in the classroom can only be successful under the following conditions. Firstly, she asserts that since human beings are not gifted with the ability to cooperate with each other, co-operative skills must be learned, like various skills in content areas. Secondly, learning activities and sitting in the classroom must be structured to guarantee face-to-face interaction and cooperation among students. Finally, a successful process of cooperation requires each individual to share responsibilities rather than the monopoly by one member (Christison, 1990).

3. Statement of the Problem

The main purpose of this study is to investigate general English achievement problems. As Johnson and Johnson (1994b) point out, however, it is not enough to just put students in groups and tell them to work together for CL to work. How such groupings are structured will largely determine whether or not they will be more effective than competitive or individualistic groupings. CL is important for creating inclusive classroom environments that meet the needs of all students because it takes their heterogeneity into account thus encouraging peer support and connection. And given that most classrooms are heterogeneous, it only makes sense to use an approach to teaching and learning which accounts for this heterogeneity.

According to Vanpelt (2010), in the classroom and within the school, a teacher will be utilizing many different types of assessments with his or her students. Some assessments may be formal, such as Standardized Achievement Tests or Informal Achievement Tests while others are less conventional. Both offer the teachers a good basis for determining what skills are being learned (or not learned) within the classroom. According to Heaton (1975), ways of assessing performance in the four major skills may take the form of tests of listening (auditory) comprehension, in which short utterances, dialogues, talks, and lectures are given to the tastes; speaking ability, usually in the form of an interview, a picture description, role play, and a problem –solving task involving pair work or group work; reading comprehension, in which questions are set to test the students' ability to understand the gist of a text and to extract key information on specific points in the text; and writing ability, usually in the form of letters, reports , memos, messages, instructions, and accounts of past events ,etc.

According to Khodareza and Taheri (2014), in order to provide effective guidance in developing competent speakers of English, it is necessary to examine the factors affecting adult learners' oral communication, components underlying speaking proficiency, and specific skills or strategies used in communication. Most people who learn a foreign language (here specifically English) in Iran, seem to learn, if ever, only the written form of it and always have problems with the spoken form of language.

4. Research Question of the Study

Based on the literature that was reviewed in the study, this study aims to seek to the following question:

Does group work enhance a higher general English achievement among junior high school students?

5. Hypotheses of the Study

Based on the above research question, the hypothesis of the study is as follows:

H0: Group work does not enhance a higher general English achievement among junior high school students.

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6. Review of the Literature

In fact group work means several students working together and working together does not necessarily involve cooperation. Cooperative learning in an arrangement in which students work in mixed ability groups and are awarded on the basis of the success of the group (Woolfolk, 2004). In cooperative learning classrooms, students work in small group and rewards are based on the entire group performance, this is a small group method or technique (Sprinthall & Sprinthall, 2000). Cooperative learning activities are carefully structured learning activities in which students are held accountable for their contribution, participation and learning, they are also provided incentives to work as team in teaching others and learning from others (Slavin, 2000). Cooperative learning is an instructional strategy in which students engage in activities that promote collaboration and teamwork. Individual achievement is sometimes over looked in favor of group accomplishment (Johnson et al., 1987).

7. Methodology

7.1 Participants of the Study

The number of participants in this study was 60 out of 100 Iranian junior high school students. The participants of the study were selected from among Iranian junior high school students from Fatemat-Al-Zahra (Shahed) School of Lahijan, Iran with the age of 15 and they were studying English language as a foreign language. The homogeneity of the participants was estimated by general English test. The participants were from the same school. Then the researchers divided participants into two groups of 30 in each. The experimental group was divided into small groups each group including 4 or 5 participants. Two groups were selected through a test of general English with the criteria of at least one standard deviation below and above the mean.

7.2 Materials

In the present study, the researchers utilized multiple choice questions, reading comprehension, and grammatical test consisted of general English items. We have designed some group based games and activities that would be applied in treatment. The material used in the study consisted of six lesson plans, six work sheets, and six quizzes. The material as mentioned above was prepared in the light of literature available on cooperation learning.

7.3 Material for the General Test

Each group received general English test such as reading, listening, writing, and speaking as pretest to figure out their current level. Then as treatment, experiment group and control group took practices in all skills.

7.4 Material for the Pre-Test of the Study

A pre-test of general English achievement from a teacher made test was administrated to both groups in order to collect data on participant's level of performance before the treatment took place. Also the reliability of the test was trusted of the SPSS software. The reliability of the test was estimated using the Cronbach's Alpha ($\alpha = 0.74$). The test made by the teacher of the study. It has 20 questions items. It has some multiple choice and some true/ false questions items. The result of the pre- test was also used to determine the level of students in order to be able to divide them equally into control and experimental group. The duration of each exam was 60 minutes. The test was same for pre-test. The participants were not allowed to use dictionaries or cheat during the each exam.

The experimental group worked in heterogeneous learning teams. They were divided into small groups, each group including 4 or 5 participants. The team formation was done with a lot of care and attention to ensure practicality for each group. The teacher tried to be as motivating as positing impression on the students. The seating arrangement in experimental group was different from that in control group. Instead of sitting in rows facing each other's backs, the students sat face-to-face with their group members.

7.5 Material for the Treatment of the Study

After five sessions a post test was administered to the participants to be sure that the intervention had a causal effect. This test consisted of a similar format and time span as used the pretest was also applied in this test. At the end, all the participants in the experimental group as well as the control group took the achievement posttest in order to determine whether there was a significant difference between the two groups mean scores after the treatment.

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7.6 Procedure

At first, one of the classes was randomly considered as the experimental group which was exposed to the treatment. The other class taken as the control group was exposed to no treatment. The control group was taught via and existing method: educator-fronted, lecturing the lessons. For the experimental and control groups before the treatment, general test was run for the sake of homogeneity. The pre-test was administered in the second week of the term. Students' scores on the 60-item test were recorded. On the basis of pre-test results the researchers selected the students from control and experimental groups with the same scores for this study.

In the first three sessions of the course, adequate time was appropriated to helping students get used to the new method and this made them less stressful. Throughout the course, students were required to work in groups and the teacher was constantly monitoring the improvement of each group. Therefore, if a group was shown to have an inappropriate formation, the teacher made the necessary changes in the members of the group to ensure optimal functionality of each group. Furthermore, students were encouraged to work in groups and help one another. The teacher checked to see if the students had any misunderstanding in the learning process or learning materials presented.

The researchers observed the classrooms while the teacher monitored classroom to check group achievements and intervene if need arises. The statistical procedure is based on computer programs. The data analysis is a process of gathering, modeling, and transforming data with the goal of highlighting useful information suggesting conclusions, and supporting decision making. The data gathered in this study was analyzed through teacher made test.

8. Data Analysis and Findings

The findings of this study have been discussed here in two main sections: first, the results of descriptive analysis and second, the results of inferential analysis. All these have been illustrated in tables 1 to 4 in the sections below.

8.1 Descriptive Analysis of the Data

This section focuses on the descriptive analysis of obtained data in this study. Such analysis was done using SPSS software. Table 1 shows the descriptive analysis for the pretest and posttest of general English in the experimental group of the study.

Table 1. Descriptive results of the experimental group of the study

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Pretest EX	17.2333	30	2.19220	0.40024
	Posttest EX	17.6000	30	1.90462	0.34773

As it is indicated in table 1, the number of participants has been 30 in each experiment (N=30). There has been no missing value which shows all selected students took part in the experiments of the study. The mean for the pretest scores of general English exam in the experimental group was shown to be 17.2333 as compared to the mean for posttest scores in the same group which was 17.6000. As for the standard deviations obtained for the experimental group, there seems to be more variability among the pretest scores than the posttest. The higher mean confirms that group work learning led to better achievement and was effective in better learning. This may demonstrate the participants' posttest scores are more homogenous after conducting the treatment of the study. The same descriptive analysis has been done for the pretest and posttest of general English in the control group of the study that has been illustrated in table 2 below.

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Table 2. Descriptive results of the control group of the study

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 2	Pretest CON	16.0333	30	1.09807	0.20048
	Posttest CON	15.8667	30	1.07425	0.19613

Table 2 shows that the number of participants has been 30 in each experiment (N=30) and there has been no missing value. The mean for the pretest scores of general English in control group was shown to be 16.0333 as compared to the mean for the posttest scores of the same group which was shown to be 15.8667. As for the standard deviation obtained for the control group, there seems to be more variability among the pretest scores in the poet test.

8.2 Inferential Analysis of the Data

This section focuses on the inferential analysis of the obtained data of the study. Such analysis was done using the SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Science) from which the compare mean and independent sample test were selected for calculating the T value.

Table 3. Independent samples T-test results of the study

		t-test for Equality of Means		
		Observed t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Speaking	Equal variances assumed	4.342	58	0.000
	Equal variances not assumed	4.342	45.755	0.000
		Critical t = 2.000		

Table 3 shows that the observe T-value of the study was calculated as to be (4.342) and the degree of freedom was (58). The level of significance was calculated as to be 0.000. In each group of the study, the results of the paired sample T- test have been illustrated in the table 4.

Table 4. Paired sample results of the study

		Observed t	Critical t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pair 1	Pretest EX – Posttest EX	3.612	2.045	29	0.001
Pair 2	Pretest Con – Posttest Con	0.817	2.045	29	0.042

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According to table 4, the covariance between the two sets of pretest and posttest scores in the experimental group is 3.612 while it is 0.817 in the control group of the study. The critical T in two groups are same. Both levels of significance in the results are lower than 0.05 that is, 0.001 for the experimental group and 0.042 for the control group. These indicate that the estimations were not by chance.

9. Results of Hypothesis Testing

In this paper, the results of testing the hypothesis of the study have been presented and elaborated. The descriptive and inferential analysis showed that the learners in the experimental group could do better than the learners in the control group in general English ability. The research question is presented bellow once more:

H0: Does group work enhance a higher general English achievement among junior high school students?

The hypothesis of the study which aimed the effect of group working on Iranian EFL learners' general English learning ability was rejected. Because observe T is more than the critical T. And the level of significant is 0.05.

10. Discussion

This study was set out with the aim of assessing the importance of general English achievement and group work among Iranian EFL learners. At first, on the basis of research question, a null hypothesis was also proposed assuming that "group work does not enhance a higher general English achievement among junior high school students."

As it was already mentioned in this study, based on the results of independent-samples T- tests, there were no significant differences in general ability between the groups at pretest, while there were significant differences among them at the general English in posttest. The obtained mean score by each of the two groups on the general English posttest indicated that the experimental group obtained a higher mean than the control group, which turned out to be significant. Therefore, the findings of this study revealed that there was a statistically significant difference between experimental group teaching group work instruction and control group dealing with no treatment.

On the other hand, based on the findings of this study, the hypothesis of this study was rejected. Regarding the group work strategies instruction on the general English ability of the EFL learners, the results of data analyses revealed that group work strategies instruction had significant effects on EFL learners' general English ability. The findings showed that the group work instruction enhanced general English ability of experimental group. Also, the findings revealed a significant difference between the groups in the posttest. This study produced results which corroborate the findings of Attle and Baker (2007) that have developed learning experiences that combine the two. They outline an instructional strategy that brings together "components of cooperative learning with the positive aspects of motivational competition through inter-group competition between collaborative teams."

Cheng (1995) said that the average scores of students in cooperative learning were about two points higher than those of students in a traditional teacher-based English class. This study has examined the main components of formal cooperative learning characteristics and cooperative structures in foreign language learning. However, cooperative learning can be relevant for teachers in the sense that it is an excellent way of conducting communicative language teaching.

Cooperative learning groups can enhance students' learning experience not only academically but also outside university in the workplace. With this in mind, Kagan (1992) supports cooperative learning through his structural approach where he improves communicative competence which is in many ways another word for social competence. One point worth elaborating here is that, contrary to what many might think, CL extends well beyond group work. In other words, individuals working together in a group is not necessarily synonymous with CL.

At a theoretical level, group work in a language classroom necessitates a number of individuals assuming certain task or parts of a task and heading to reach certain goals. CL, however, heads much further as discussed albeit briefly in the introduction section of this paper, CL is the promotion of the culture of not just fulfilling your role in harmony with the mandate of a group but assuming responsibility for the learning of others as well. Furthermore, Brown (1994) supports the use of students' group work and peer work stating that students often carry out peer correction in these activities and this is more productive than teachers always correcting students. Finally to repeat a point made earlier in this paper, we learn more effectively from our errors because we are more inclined to remember them (Gee, 1998).

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The workshop, on which this paper is based, was intended to illustrate how the advantages of using small group and pair work in ESL/EFL classrooms far outweigh the disadvantages. As Gee points out in this quote, language is connected to the idea of communication. By using SGW and PW in our classes we can help our students see that language usage is more than the sum of its grammatical and collocation parts, it is about effectively connecting with others in order to establish yourself as a unique and valuable member of the community, in this case the classroom community.

One of the key challenges for teachers not only in Iran but in many educational environments is encouraging the students to work in groups. And share their ideas in a range of tasks aiming at better comprehension as well as higher involvement of the learners.

11. Implications of the Study

The purpose of this research was to examine the effect of group work through a 10-session treatment on students' general English ability. The results of this research support the idea group work can be highly effective and powerful tool and help in attracting and sustaining the learners' attention in the class, which is the main goal for making learning successful. The findings of this study suggest that the use of group work can present opportunities for helping students and their encouragement.

Through motivating and decreasing stress, EFL teachers can make their classes motivating and enjoyable. Teachers can save time and energy in classes through use of GW. In general, therefore, it seems that EFL teachers need more training to develop GW in class. Sometimes it is difficult to make EFL learners understand certain difficult and complicated topics. However, different topics are complicated teachers can surly help a lot in making the ideas simple and easy to grasp for the EFL learners due to GW.

This is the best situation which all the language pedagogues advocate for meaningful teaching. As a result, it can be claimed that a good teacher is the one who uses GW, which helps students learn better since they prevent them from staying passive during the lesson. On the other hand, it is hoped that this study can consist of useful findings for other researchers and syllabus designers in order to enhance the effectiveness of GW ability. It is claimed that teachers have an incisive role in the learning process, but they cannot achieve their aims of language teaching without the help of other educationists. In this regard, language teaching aims should be important to other groups of educationists, such as syllabus and course designers, material and curriculum developers, and policy makers. Syllabus and course designers should focus on GW that helps learners improve their knowledge and abilities to produce second language. Then, syllabus designers are expected to include the use of GW.

12. Suggestions for the Further Research

The subjects of this research were intermediate level. Other research projects can also be carried out regarding other proficiency levels such as elementary or advanced. The participants of this research all studied in junior high school. Other researches can be conducted at school or university setting. The age range of participants in this study was between12 and 15. Other researches can be carried out with other age ranges such as children. In this research, only the effect of interactive and no interactive Power Point slides on speaking skill of EFL learners were investigated. May be for future research it is beneficial to study the effect of self-efficacy on the other skills of language e.g. listening, reading, writing, and speaking or on components of language such as grammar, vocabulary, and etc.

Many students need some preparation for group activities as they may not be accustomed to working with classmates on academic tasks. Instead, they may have mostly experienced teacher-fronted instruction. To prepare students to cooperate, second language teachers often include explicit instruction in cooperative skills. The teaching of cooperative skills is a cooperative learning principle. Examples of these cooperative skills include praising others, asking for help, and giving and receiving suggestions (Gillies, 2007). The most common way that teachers can implement this view of learning as asocial activity is by the use of cooperative learning activities in their second language classes. As noted above, cooperative learning offers second language teachers many ideas for how they can go beyond merely asking students to work together in pairs or groups.

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