



## **Group Collaboration, Scaffolding Instruction, and Peer Assessment of Iranian EFL Learners Oral Tasks**

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### **Abstract**

Peer assessment has gained growing popularity in education and teaching. Being a learning tool, evaluating their peers can equip learners with skills to develop judgments about what forms high-quality work. There have been however research gaps in the literature showing a lack of adequate work on the investigation of peer assessment in a group-oriented classroom context. The present study intended to compare the effectiveness of group work with peer assessment and scaffolding with lack of it on learners' oral accuracy. For this purpose, the regular past tense –ed grammatical target structure as a challenging feature was selected. A total of 34 low-intermediate Iranian EFL learners in two intact classes took part in the study. Although one class was exposed to group work enhanced by peer assessment and scaffolding, the control class did not receive any such instruction. Participants provided answers to pre- and post- grammar tests and their performance was subjected to statistical data analysis by means of ANCOVA. The results indicated the superiority of the experimental group in comparison to the control group. The findings were therefore in line with the cognitive elaboration hypothesis and the sociocultural theory. The findings were discussed with relation to implications for language teachers.

**Keywords:** Group Work, Peer Assessment, Scaffolding, Oral Accuracy, and Sociocultural Theory

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## **Introduction**

Interaction can be considered a key aspect in the acquisition of language in second/foreign language contexts. Ellis (1985) defines interaction as the discourse which is mutually shaped by the addresser and the addressee and input stems from interaction. Therefore, the interactionist model is based on the assumption that language learning is the outcome of an interaction between the learners' mental capacities and the linguistic context. Long (1996) believes that interaction is essential for language learning. According to Long, three dimensions of language interaction can be identified: input, production, and feedback. Input is the language provided to the learners by the native speakers, the teacher, or peers; production (output) is the language spoken by language learners themselves and the feedback is the answer or reaction given to the learners' production by the interlocutors (Khezrlou, 2012; Khezrlou, Ellis, & Sadeghi, 2017).

According to the sociocultural theory of the Russian psychologist, Lev Vygostky (1978), learning best occurs in social interaction. He opines that this kind of learning leads to development. Regarding this perspective, the best type of feedback to the learners' errors is the one provided through social interaction. Through this kind of interaction, the learner is not provided with explicit or implicit corrective feedback, but a step-by-step and contingent feedback negotiation through which the learner moves from the most implicit to the most explicit corrective feedback; that is the learner receives the corrective feedback based on his/her zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Aljaffreh & Lantolf, 1994; Nassaji & Swain, 2000). According to Vygostky (1978), ZPD is the distance between what the learner is able to do independently and what s/he will be able to do with the help of a more capable other. In other words, the distance between the learner's actual and potential ability level is called ZPD. In this process of language negotiation, the learners are not presented the accurate response; rather, they are situated in a problem-solving process which enables them to move from other-regulation to self-regulation (Aljaffreh & Lantolf, 1994). Progressing through this continuum enhances learners' self-esteem and the language evaluation would be internalized in their language competence, bringing about cognitive development.

There have been numerous studies putting Vygotskian notions to empirical analysis showing the efficacy of this approach in the development of language competence. There has been, however, very limited interest in examining the role of peer assessment integrated with group work and scaffolding on learners' oral performance. The present study was an attempt to investigate the role of peer assessment and group work within the learners' ZPD in their oral language performance.

## **Literature review**

Vygotsky argued that individuals gain control of higher mental processes through the use of language as a semiotic system to interact with culture in social interactions and to mediate their higher psychological functions interpersonally. According to him, this kind of psychological function occurs in two levels: first, on the social level and interpersonally, and then on the psychological level and intrapersonally. Within the interpersonal relationships between the novice and the expert, concept formation and knowledge acquisition by the novice is dependent on the cooperation of the expert who can transmit the novice from the inter-mental level (social interaction) to the intra-mental level (that is, reflection, internalization, and performance). When the novice achieves the intra-mental level, it means that the novice is capable of controlling his/her behavior and acting alone. That is, s/he achieves his/her ZPD and the gap between the individual and society is removed.

However, the interpretations and explanations of the exact ways that scaffolding relates to it are different. These include the conception of scaffolding as a direct employment of Vygotsky's notion of teaching in the zone of proximal development (Wells, 1999), and the opinion that the concept of scaffolding only partly mirrors the fruitfulness of Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (e.g., Daniels, 2001). According to Ellis (2000), the interactions that help learners with their learning process are those in which the learners scaffold the new tasks.

Pellettieri (2000) explored the effectiveness of negotiated interactions between learners in dyads in computer-mediated communication context in the delivery of corrective feedback together with the integration of target-like forms in the future dialogue. The participants of the study were 20 Intermediate-Spanish students. The analysis of the data revealed that the learners were provided with both explicit and implicit feedback that pushed them to make modifications to target forms. Moreover, Pellettieri found that as students were producing speech, they were also correcting themselves. Students repeatedly backspaced to make syntactic elaborations, which pushed their utterances to a more advanced level of syntax. He concluded that the visual saliency of the SCMC environment enabled the learners to see, reflect on, and edit their own production, as a result, increasing the opportunities for learners to notice their errors with minimal outside feedback and take the responsibility for error correction, that is self-repair.

Lee (2008) examined the negotiation of language correction by means of professional-to-novice collaborative attempts and scaffolding with 30 intermediate-level learners working on three different activities of jigsaw, spot-the-differences, and open-ended question. The participants were divided into 15 expert-to-novice pairs who carried out six two-way information exchange tasks in a chat room. Each task lasted approximately 45 minutes. In addition, the novice members were supposed to write a reflective log to report their attitudes and observations on online

feedback negotiations and error corrections upon the completion of this project. The expert speakers included 15 advanced learners, whereas the novices comprised 15 intermediate learners. In case of any emerging language error, the professionals provided assistance to attract the learners' attention to language form. They found that text chats advocated the focus-on-form procedure empowered by collaborative involvement. In order to sustain the inter-subjectivity, a mutual understanding of the task in a dialogic problem solving was implemented between the expert and the novice, and they both employed L2 and L1 to negotiate L2 forms for both syntactic and lexical errors. The findings revealed that the experts helped their peers linguistically and cognitively in the process of feedback negotiation. The researcher concluded that it was not easy to provide corrective feedback and to attend to linguistic errors during the meaning-based interaction, that is focusing on meaning and form simultaneously is burdensome for language learners. Also, the focus-on-form is more salient in computer-mediated communication than in face-to-face interaction as the learner reads visual saliency of the errors, and the correct written text on the screen. The findings indicated that on the whole, the professionals could provide step-by-step scaffolding when needed in order to attract learners' attention to non-target-like-forms that led to error correction and, thereby, self-repair. Although, the results of the analysis of the logs showed that some learners accepted the significance of using the target language appropriately, they did not find focus-on-form correction very helpful. Some of the learners were eager to take part in the session as a chance for communication rather than an opportunity to repair their grammatical errors. Also, they viewed online interaction as less stressful, which allowed them more time to reflect on linguistic forms.

### **Group Learning**

Lin (2002) examined a total of 73 students of intact classes in the university to compare the effectiveness of a conventional whole class (control group) and a cooperative class (experimental group) with regard to the oral proficiency. Experimental group participants received cooperative treatment in which there has been an emphasis in the use of integrated skills and cooperation. After the treatment, a post-test was conducted to see the overall improvement in each class. The major purpose of Lin in this study was to see the changes in the interactional strategies employed by the participants in the oral pre-tests and post-test. Conversation analysis showed that the ESs appeared to do somewhat better in interactional strategy use than the CSs. However, the results showed that CL techniques were no better than the conventional activities in bringing about improved oral proficiency.

In another study, Al-Twairish (2009) conducted a study to investigate the efficiency of a conventional teaching versus the communicative teaching method with regard to the students' listening and speaking abilities. To this end, whereas the

experimental group participants were exposed to the various number of communicative activities, control group participants were taught via the audio-lingual method techniques. The results of the quantitative analyses of this study indicated certain improvements in the pre-test and post-test scores of the experimental group participants in contrast to the control group participants. Al-Twairish (2009, p. 5) made the following recommendations with respect to the findings of the study:

1. that a shift should be made from non-communicative to communicative ELT;
2. that educational policy-makers should consider the applicability of the CA in the Saudi context;
3. that EFL teachers should receive in-service training in applying CA principles;
4. that students should be encouraged to speak the target language with their colleagues; and
5. that local ELT textbook writers should work along communicative lines.

### **Peer Assessment**

In all its types, peer assessment has gained growing popularity in education and teaching. Being a learning tool, evaluating their peers can equip learners with skills to develop judgments about what forms high-quality work (Topping, 1998). Below, we review the studies that have examined peer assessment in developing language learning skills.

In a study by Davies (2006), higher education learners in a computing course participated and were asked to implement a computerized peer assessment system called Computerized Assessment by Peers. Each learner was required to write a text, which was later rated and commented on anonymously by their peers. Davies examined the peer feedback and came up with a “feedback index”, that is, a criterion for the quality of a piece of evaluated text. The differences in the feedback indices showed that the peers in the lower performance group were more inclined towards being less critical, while those with higher performance were more critical.

The study by Lin et al. (2001) also concluded an interaction effect, that is low decision-making learners performed better when receiving particular feedback rather than holistic feedback; on the other hand, the feedback specificity did not matter for high decision-making participants. One out of five research works also concluded facilitated domain-specific capability in learners, but without attributing this to specific and special conditions or peer assessment method types and designs.

Van den Berg, Admiraal, and Pilot (2006) noted that sufficient timing and small group work were effective for learning from revisions according to the received peer feedback. Seven peer assessment designs were created to determine which specificities promoted successful and beneficial peer assessment. The

participants were history learners, from whom 131 were assigned to groups using peer assessment, and 37 to groups not implementing peer assessment. The participants transmitted draft reports and those in the peer assessment groups were presented peer feedback. They were asked to revise their drafts into the last forms which were then marked by a teacher. Results indicated non-significant differences between the grades of groups with peer assessment and those without it. In contrast, for learning consequences such as processing feedback, peer assessment was enhanced by working in small groups of three to four learners. These learners were better able to compare feedback from different peers in order to spot the relevance. Van den Berget al. (2006) also argued that presenting learners with enough time to revise their work (i.e., sufficient time between the peer assessment and teacher assessment) was efficient and desirable.

The review of the related literature makes it obvious that several gaps exist in research on peer assessment in language learning that provide starting points for further experimental works. To offer a more comprehensive insight into effective peer assessment processes, factors concerning content as well as research methodologies demand more attention. The present study was, as a result, an attempt to examine the use of peer assessment in group work strengthened by scaffolding on Iranian EFL learners' regular past -ed structure use in oral language production. In particular, the following research question was addressed:

1. Is there a significant difference between peer assessment (coupled with scaffolding and group work) and lack of it in EFL learners' oral language accuracy?

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Participants for this study included 34 learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) from two intact general English classes in a language institute in Boukan, Iran. They were about 14–18 years old. None of the participants had overseas learning experiences in the beginning of the study and had limited opportunity to use English for interactive purpose outside the class. There were 14 females and 20 males. As school learners, they had 4 hours of English per week at school and 4 hours at the language institute. The learners were randomly assigned into the experimental (N = 18) and control (N = 16) groups. To make sure about the homogeneity of the groups in terms of level of oral proficiency, found to be low-intermediate, an independent samples t-test was carried out with pre-test scores and indicated a non-significant difference between them ( $p = .15$ ).

## **Instruments**

### **Pre-test and Post-test**

A multiple-choice test with a total of 30 items was developed for the purpose of this study. The test required the participants' knowledge about the regular past tense –ed form. Learners were allowed 20 minutes to complete the test and it was administered two weeks prior to the treatment. The same pre-test with a random scrambling of items was administered as the post-test after the instructional intervention ended. It needs to be added that the test was piloted with 10 learners of similar characteristics and it was found to have an acceptable level of reliability ( $\alpha = .78$ ).

### **Oral Narrative Task**

The oral narrative tasks constituted the main material for the conduction of this study. The oral narrative tasks asked the learners to narrate a story orally according to a set of pictures presented to them from Heaton (1975). Learners were asked to narrate a story in groups of three based on a picture strip entitled "A Surprise" (Heaton, 1975, see Appendix). In this task, learners were each given two minutes to look at the pictures and then were asked to tell a story accordingly. They had to narrate the story using the past tense form of verbs in regular type. A total of three narrative tasks were used in three separate sessions and immediately after the third task, learners were administered the post-test. The narrative task can be referred to in the Appendix.

### **Procedure**

Learners were first administered the pre-test in order to develop two groups of homogenous level learners. As a result of the pre-test, only low-intermediate level learners were selected as the participants of this study. Since this study was classroom based, the other students whose scores were deviant from those of the majority, were excluded from the study by not considering their performance. Afterwards, two classes served as the two groups. An experimental group was exposed to peer assessment together with group work and scaffolding while the control group received neither of these activities. In the experimental group, the whole class was first divided into six groups with three learners in each. Learners in the group were presented with six pictures for the oral narrative tasks and were given two minutes to look at them. Subsequently, they were asked to narrate part of the task. When every learner in each group completed his/her own narration, their peers either within the group or from other groups provided their evaluations of their narration giving feedback to them. The peers were instructed to assess their friends' performance with regard to both language use and content. This procedure went on with each group until the whole class finished the task. This process lasted for a total of three consecutive sessions after which the multiple-choice post-test measuring their enhancement in the use of regular past tense –ed was administered to the participants.

## Data Analysis

Learners' answers to the pre-test and post-test was marked as either correct (1) or incorrect (0). The obtained data were then analyzed statistically using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Firstly, in order to ensure the normality of data, Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was conducted which confirmed the normality of both pre-test ( $p = .25$ ) and post-test ( $p = .84$ ). Later, in order to provide an answer to the research question, a one-way Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was carried out to spot the participants' progress from pre-test to post-test.

## Results

A one-way ANCOVA was run to provide an answer to the research question of the study concerned with the role of peer assessment embedded in group work and scaffolding on learners' oral accuracy. As a main presumption of ANCOVA, first the homogeneity of variances was tested by Levene's test. The homogeneity of variance as a pre-requisite for the conduction of ANCOVA was approved ( $F = 5.02$ ,  $p = .32$ ) supporting the conduction of ANCOVA. The results of descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics for Experimental and Control Groups' Oral Accuracy

Groups	Mean		Standard deviation	
	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test
Experimental (N = 18)	4.88	9.88	1.85	3.17
Control (N = 16)	3.87	3.75	1.96	1.52
Total (N = 34)		7.00		3.99

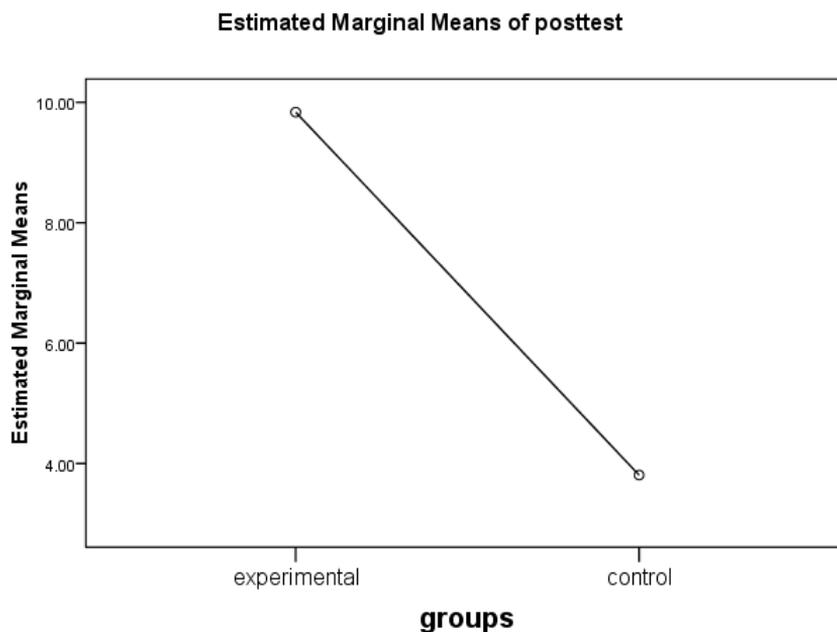
As Table 1 demonstrates, the experimental group learners' pre-test ( $M = 4.88$ ,  $SD = 1.85$ ) scores exhibited an improvement to the post-test ( $M = 9.88$ ,  $SD = 3.17$ ) in terms of non-congruent collocation learning. The control group learners' performance, on the other hand, did not change from pre-test ( $M = 3.87$ ,  $SD = 1.96$ ) to post-test ( $M = 3.75$ ,  $SD = 1.52$ ). In order to ascertain about group differences, the ANCOVA was carried out, the results of which are reported in Table 2.

**Table 2.** ANCOVA Results for Oral Accuracy across Groups

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	320.714 <sup>a</sup>	2	160.357	24.215	.000	.610
Intercept	207.798	1	207.798	31.379	.000	.503
pretest	1.491	1	1.491	.225	.638	.007
Groups	288.713	1	288.713	43.598	.000	.584
Error	205.286	31	6.622			
Total	2192.000	34				
Corrected Total	526.000	33				

a. R Squared = .610 (Adjusted R Squared = .585)

According to Table 2, there was a significant main effect for group,  $F(1, 33) = 43.59, p = .000$ , reflecting the superiority of experimental group over control group also corroborated by the results of descriptive statistics. Hence, the results of ANCOVA pinpoint the efficacy of peer assessment coupled with scaffolding in group work in resulting in a substantial enhancement of the learners' oral accuracy. The results are better exhibited in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Group performance in terms of oral accuracy

## Discussion

The present study aimed at exploring the effect of peer assessment embedded in a group work where learners received a chance of being scaffolded by their peers in their oral narrative productions. The findings of this study supported the effective nature of peer assessment and group work in facilitating learners' acquisition of regular past tense -ed as a challenging structure for Iranian EFL learners. This result gets extensive support from previous research which also declares this efficacy as well (e.g., Mok, 2010; van Zundert, Sluijsmans, & van Merriënboer, 2010; Nicol, Thomson, & Breslin, 2014; Hung, Samuelson, & Chen, 2016). The study by Hung, Chen, and Samuelson (2016) provided evidence for the fifth grade learners' improvement in oral production as a result of the application of peer assessment. It appears evident that learners in groups receive peer motivation and individualized help from their more skilled friends. They may see that their commitments are expected and appreciated for the whole group. Their peers are accessible to help

them when they need a specific response to an inquiry or answer for a problem. When a partner produces an inappropriate response, the more capable learners in the group can clarify the reasons why that answer is not satisfactory, and this clarification can lead to cooperation among group partners which can advance deeper learning of materials through clarification, elaboration, or mental interpretation which takes place throughout this collaboration and scaffolding.

Also, the theoretical significance of group learning and scaffolding in improving learners' language learning is focused around the view that learners in groups may feel vital in light of the fact that they perform roles which are crucial to the fulfillment of the required task. Moreover, they have data and resources that are essential for their groups. Similarly, communication among partners can bring about expanded accomplishment through elaboration and arrangement of the material prepared by the teacher. This is in line with the finding of cognitive elaboration hypothesis that group members need to become involved in a cognitive restructuring or elaboration to retain information in memory and consolidate it into the current cognitive structures (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1998).

The effectiveness of the instructional intervention in the present study implies that learners were more active and participated in oral language production more, which indicate that grammar learning could be fostered (Kern, 1995; Egbert, 2001; Bax, 2003; Fiori, 2005; Van Deusen-Scholl, Frei, & Dixon, 2005; Fitze, 2006). Active participation is recognized as one of the significant components of a successful learner-oriented learning program (White, 2009). Learners' self-confidence, active participation, and motivation were all the offshoots of the collaborative learning where the conversation partners and the teacher actively interacted with each other. Kaye (1989) contends that group work is valuable in terms of providing a useful rate of active learning since it both enhances an equal amount of turn-taking and endorses more reflected and contemplated input.

## **Conclusion**

The findings of this study corroborated the effectiveness of peer assessment in terms of low-intermediate learners' acquisition of past tense –ed structure through a group-oriented scaffolded practices. The results have some implications for the language teachers regarding the role of these factors in bringing about better oral language use. The results of the studies on learner engagement and interest in foreign language learning (Nikolov, 2006) indicate that learners will not focus on learning unless classroom tasks are intrinsically motivating for them. They cannot control and monitor their own learning, but if they are engaged with decision making, they will gradually develop effective learning. In the present study, for example, group work and particularly receiving comments from their peers were motivating and helped them engage in the activities. However, in order for the development of long-term benefits of group-focused learning, teachers should equip learners with appropriate learning strategies to use in dealing with future activities.

In fact, teachers have important roles in the group-oriented collaborative instruction such as the selection and sequencing of tasks, familiarizing learners, and making learners aware of the outcomes of the task. In the present study, due to the fact that learners had brainstormed on the topic of narration in the time allowed before the narrative task, they were provided with sufficient time to shape ideas, organize arguments, and prepare the language for the efficient performance. The teacher was also responsible for grouping learners and facilitating the discussion. The instructor is suggested to join the group cooperation to present technical help, affirm the learners' comprehension of the task, and informally evaluate the ongoing process. Therefore, in learning contexts in which the peer assessment is integrated with group-based teaching, handling these processes is an essential component of the teacher's role.

The current study was restricted by a number of limitations that should be considered in interpreting the results. Firstly, this study followed a cross-sectional design with a pretest-intervention-posttest design that can limit the generalizability of the findings. Further research is encouraged to be carried out over an extended period of time to get deeper insights about learners' development. Secondly, there is a need to extract data about both the learners and teachers regarding their attitudes towards using this approach in the classroom. Finally, with rapid advances in technological development specifically in the area of education and teaching, it suggested that future studies can adopt technological aids both within and outside the language classroom to facilitate acquisition of different language skills.

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### Authors Biography

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## Appendix

### A Surprise (Heaton, 1975)

