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Comparing the Effects of Collaborative and Individual Output Tasks on the Acquisition of English Articles

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ABSTRACT

The use of pair and small group work has been supported within the interactionist and sociocultural theories of learning. It is assumed that collaboration would lead to second language acquisition. Inspired by these theoretical claims, the present study investigates the effects of two output tasks on the acquisition of English articles. Thirty-one EFL learners, divided into two groups of pairs and individuals, participated in this study. All participants were administered a pretest and a post-test and completed two output tasks (cloze and text-editing) during four sessions. The results were indicative of no significant difference in the acquisition of English articles between the two groups of the study. However, a significant difference was found for the effect of task types.

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1. Introduction

Recent studies in SLA have supported the use of collaborative output tasks in L2 classrooms (Colina & Garcia-Mayo 2007, Donato 1994, Kim 2008, Kowal & Swain 1994, Nassaji & Tian 2010, Storch 1999, 2002, 2007, Storch & Wigglesworth 2007, Swain 1995, 1998, Swain & Lapkin 1995, 1998, 2001). The role of output in L2 learning came into vogue following the observation of inaccurate performance of learners in immersion and content-based language classrooms (Nassaji & Tian 2010). In these classrooms, English L1 students were exposed to a lot of meaning-based input in French. Swain and her colleagues found that although the majority of these students achieve native-like proficiency in comprehending L2, their productive abilities, particularly in morphological and syntactic accuracy remain far from native-like norms (Harley & Swain 1984, Swain 1985). Swain (1985) argued that the reason why these learners are weak at morpho-syntactic areas is that they are not adequately engaged in producing L2. Considering the inadequacies of input-based instruction, she proposed that language production plays a significant role in L2 acquisition. She argued that output provides a unique opportunity for the use of linguistic resources, allowing the learners to test their hypotheses about the L2 and encouraging them to move from semantic to syntactic processing. Later Swain (2000) revised the output hypothesis and proposed that language learning occurs in interactive dialogic production. She stated that while interacting in a dialogue, pairs of learners draw attention to problematic areas in their interlanguage and verbalize alternative solutions.

To provide empirical support for the use of pair work in ESL classes, several

studies investigated the role of collaborative output tasks in L2 development (e.g., Abadikhah 2012, Abadikhah & Shahriyarpour 2012, Colina & Garcia-Mayo 2007, Donato 1994, Kim 2008, Kinsella 1996, Nassaji & Tian 2010, Storch 1999, 2002, 2007, Storch & Wigglesworth 2007). Although many studies have been conducted, comparing pair-work and individual work, it is still not clear whether some linguistic features benefit from pair work interaction. Compared to other linguistic features, English articles (definite and indefinite) were found to be more challenging for Iranian EFL learners, since they frequently produced them inaccurately in their compositions on the institute's placement test. With this background, this study aimed to explore the role of collaborative output tasks in enhancing the accuracy and learning of articles in English.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Conceptual Framework

The use of pair and small group work has been supported within the interactionist and sociocultural theories of learning. According to Ellis (2005), the studies conducted within the theoretical framework of Long's (1983) 'interaction hypothesis', mainly centered on negotiation of meaning which was fostered during pair and group work. They indicated that using proper tasks would increase the opportunities for interaction and negotiation of meaning. Nevertheless, the results of these studies were not indicative of interlanguage development.

More recent studies have adopted a sociocultural perspective (SCT) which urges the learners to produce output collaboratively (Swain & Lapkin 1998). Originated in the works of Vygotsky (1978, 1986), SCT is based on the concept that human activities occur in cultural contexts and are mediated by



language and other symbolic systems, and can be best appreciated when explored in their historical development (John-Steiner & Holbrook 1996). One major tenet of SCT stated above is the social nature of human development, that is, learning and cognitive development of individuals have their origins in social sources. Lantolf (2000) elaborated more on this concept and stated that “at first the activity of the individuals is organized and regulated (i.e. mediated) by others, but eventually, in normal development, we come to organize and regulate our own mental and physical activity through the appropriation of the regulatory means employed by others” (pp. 13-14).

Adopting SCT, Swain (2000) used the term ‘collaborative dialogue’ to refer to the interaction in which a speaker (expert or novice) helps another speaker (novice) to do an activity which they are unable to do individually (Ellis, 2008). It is within the collaborative classrooms that teachers and students co-construct a context in which learning is optimized. Unlike the traditional classrooms where teachers are the only source of knowledge, in collaborative classrooms, the teacher is the more knowledgeable person who assists students in constructing knowledge. This gained knowledge results from collaboration between teachers and students and also between the students themselves. In practice, what happens in collaborative classrooms is that the personal experiences and inclinations of the interlocutors are taken into consideration.

As claimed in SCT, the acquisition of the linguistic features first happens on an intermental plane and then is internalized through subsequent individual performance on an intramental plane, within the individual. It follows that the use of pair and small group work which involves both of the learners in

the co-construction of meaning would enhance their performance during the subsequent encounters with these tasks individually. Storch and Wigglesworth (2007) have also stated that interaction and knowledge co-construction can be promoted in tasks that require learners to participate in group and pair-work. The question now is whether pairs of learners interacting to complete a task would perform better than individual learners and would acquire the knowledge co-constructed during their interactions.

Adopting SCT perspective, and considering novice learners, who have not yet internalized some linguistic features, it can be assumed that pairs of learners would benefit more in learning than individuals who are not collaborating in this process.

2.2. Previous Studies Comparing Collaborative and Individual Output Tasks

With regard to the use of pair work, there was a tendency to examine different types of tasks, especially collaborative output tasks after the advance of the ‘output hypothesis’ by Swain (1995). A plethora of studies can be found comparing pair/small group work and individual work (Nassaji & Tian 2010, Storch 1999, Tocalli-Beller & Swain 2007). However, there are relatively very few studies within this area that focus on the effect of task type on the acquisition of some linguistic features such as English article system.

Donato (1994) analyzed protocols of three students in a one-hour-session in which students planned for an oral activity that would take place the next week. He investigated the transcripts of the planning session in search of examples of scaffolding, a situation in social interaction in which a more knowledgeable participant provides a supportive environment for the novice learner



to extend his knowledge of the language. Out of 32 cases of collective scaffolding observed in the planning session, 75 % was used correctly one week later, which is an indication of learning.

Storch (1999) conducted a small-scale study which required eight ESL learners to complete three different types of grammar-focused exercises i.e. cloze, text reconstruction, and short composition in two sessions. Each type of exercise had two versions, one to be completed individually and the other in self-selected pairs. The linguistic features targeted in the study were articles, verb tense/aspect choice and formation, derivational morphology, and nominal morphology. In the first session, they completed a cloze exercise and a composition individually and a text reconstruction task in pairs. In the second session, two days later, they performed a text reconstruction task individually and a cloze exercise and a composition in pairs. The results suggested that collaboration had a positive effect on overall grammatical accuracy, but tended to vary with specific grammatical items, that is, collaboration reduced the accuracy of article use on the cloze exercise which focused on grammatical accuracy more overtly, but with regard to the text reconstruction and composition, which lend students more choice over grammatical decisions, the use of article was more accurate.

Swain and Lapkin (2001) explored the effect of task type on the learning and accuracy of two Grade 8 mixed-ability French immersion classes (65 students in total). The data were gathered over a five-week period while the learners were working on two collaborative output tasks: dictogloss and jigsaw. After transcribing the data, tailor-made posttests were developed based on the language-related episodes (LREs). LREs were

defined as "any part of a dialogue when the students talk about the language they are producing, question their language use, or correct themselves or others" (Swain & Lapkin 1998, p. 326). By analyzing the LREs, they found that the participants produced fewer LREs in the dictogloss compared to the jigsaw but greater accuracy and more complex language were obtained in the dictogloss. Contrary to their expectations, they found no significant difference in the degree to which the tasks drew participants' attention to the formal aspects of the language.

McDonough (2004) conducted an investigation in which sixteen Thai EFL learners worked on pair and small group oral communication activities. The findings indicated that more participation during pair and small group activities led to improved production of the target form; however, they perceived the activities to be useless for learning explicit structural aspects of the language. McDonough expressed concern over learners not benefiting from language learning opportunities during pair and small group work since they focused on achieving the goals of the oral activities rather than the language itself.

Colina and Garcia-Mayo (2007) compared the effectiveness of three task types (jigsaw, dictogloss and text reconstruction) in fostering focus on form and metatalk among low-proficiency students. Twenty-four first year undergraduate students at the elementary level participated in the study. Twelve self-selected pairs were divided into three groups and each group consisting of four pairs completed one task. The same passage was used to design the three tasks. The pairs' dialogues were recorded and then transcribed in order to identify LREs. The results indicated that all task types generated many



LREs with text reconstruction producing the largest number. The most discussed linguistic features during the tasks were determiners, connectors, and spelling. The linguistic features most talked about during the text reconstruction task were articles, passive voice, prepositions, subject-verb agreement, and verb form.

The next issue was brought about by the dichotomy of uptake and acquisition proposed by Reinders (2009). Reinders operationally defined acquisition as “improved performance on a timed and an untimed grammaticality judgment test from pre-test to post-test” and uptake “as correct supply of the target structure during completion of the treatments” (p. 203). In this study, three types of output tasks including dictation, individual text reconstruction and collaborative text reconstruction were put into investigation in order to examine the effect of each task on the uptake and acquisition of the negative adverbs in English. Twenty-eight participants took part in one pretest session, three treatment sessions, and two posttest sessions. The three tasks differed regarding their complexity and cognitive demand, whether they were completed individually or collaboratively and the amount of text to be produced by the participants. The results of the study were indicative of uptake across the three tasks during the treatment sessions; the uptake of the participants in dictation and collaborative text reconstruction was higher than that in the individual reconstruction. On the other hand, no differences were found in the acquisition of negative adverbs in English across the three task types. Nassaji and Tian (2010) examined the effectiveness of two types of collaborative output tasks (reconstruction cloze task and reconstruction editing task) on learning English phrasal verbs. Twenty-six students in two intact low-

intermediate adult ESL classrooms, who were taught by the same instructor with the same instructional goals and curriculum, participated in the study. Sixteen English phrasal verbs were selected as the target words. The study used a pretest, a treatment, and a four-day delayed posttest. In the pretest and posttest, the learners' knowledge of phrasal verbs was measured using ‘vocabulary knowledge scale’ (VKS). Prior to completing the tasks, the learners received mini-lessons on target words and the tasks. Two cloze tasks and two editing tasks (one version of each was done collaboratively and the other individually) were completed in two cycles over a period of two weeks. The study enjoyed a within-subject design, that is, all the students completed both types of tasks both collaboratively and individually. The order of the task types was also counterbalanced to remove the effect of task type. Data analysis revealed that performing the tasks collaboratively (in pairs) led to a greater accuracy in during-task performance than when performing them individually. However, by considering pretest and posttest, collaborative tasks did not result in significantly greater degrees of vocabulary knowledge than individual tasks. Regarding the effect of task type, the editing tasks were more effective than the cloze tasks in fostering interaction and learning.

Baleghizadeh (2010) investigated the impact of peer interaction during an editing task on EFL learning in Iran. Sixty-two university students majoring in English literature participated in the study and were randomly assigned to experimental and control groups. Learners' proficiency level was determined through a paper-based version of the TOEFL test. The task employed in this study was a text editing task which contained grammatical errors featuring



the use of articles, subordinating conjunctions and prepositions. The experimental group consisting of forty students performed the activity in self-selected pairs, while twenty two students in the control group performed the editing task individually. The results showed that students' overall performance significantly improved when they collaborated in pairs than when they did the activity on their own. Yet, this improvement was not persistent in different linguistic features. Although pair-work improved learners' performance in case of articles and subordinate conjunctions, this fact was not observable for prepositions.

Considering the theoretical support and the empirical evidence found in favor of pair work and on the other hand, the contradictory findings, suggesting that not all grammatical items and structures benefit from pair work interaction, the present study aims to explore the effect of pair work and task type on the grammatical accuracy of English articles produced by EFL learners. This study is going to address the following research questions:

- 1) Is there any significant difference in learning English articles between the individuals and pairs of learners completing output tasks?
- 2) What are the effects of task type (text editing and cloze) on accurate production of English articles?

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

Thirty-one low-intermediate students in a private language institute (Shokouh, Sari) participated in this study. The level of the participants was determined through institute's placement test, so the regular classes of the institute enjoy homogeneous students. From the eight classes at low intermediate level, two classes consisting of thirty one students were randomly chosen as

the individual and collaborative groups. The learners (both males and females) were within the age-range of 19 to 27. They took part in a pretest, two treatment sessions and a post-test.

3.2 Procedure

The present study employed two groups of learners: one group consisting of 9 pairs of learners (n=18) interacting with each other and performing the tasks by the assistance of their peers, and a second group (n=13) completing the tasks individually using their own available resources. The first session was devoted to the pre-test, in which all participants took part and individually completed two tasks (cloze and editing) in thirty minutes. Next, one of the two groups was randomly assigned as the collaborative group. They were asked to select their peers to work on two tasks. To ensure their familiarity with pair work, a training session was also provided for this group. Both groups took part in two treatment sessions with a one week interval. More specifically, during the second session, the two groups completed a cloze task, and during the third session, they completed an editing task, both in fifteen minutes. In the fourth session, a post-test was administered to all participants, in which they completed the same tasks as in the pretest session in 30 minutes. There was a one week interval between each session.

3.3. Instruments

The two tasks employed in this study were text editing and cloze tasks. Both tasks are grammar-focused tasks that require written output. These tasks were chosen because we observed that EFL students are reluctant to work in pairs on de-contextualized grammar-focused drills or more demanding tasks such as dictogloss. It was also inspired by the contradictory findings in the previous body of research using these tasks as their material. An earlier



study by Storch (1998) showed that the text-editing task requires learners to notice grammatical and lexical features of L2. Cloze task is a traditional exercise that measures the overall language proficiency of the students. Overall, four different tasks were used in the current study: a cloze and a text editing were used for the pretest and posttest sessions. Two additional tasks (another cloze and text editing) were also employed for the treatment sessions. In addition to English articles, the tasks used in the pretest targeted another linguistic feature (verb tense/aspect) so that the participants do not focus on the target form to fill their knowledge gap before the treatment sessions. In scoring the tasks and tests, a learner's response was considered as correct if the appropriate target form was provided in the slots of the cloze task. In the case of the editing task, they were required to

spot and edit the errors in the text in order to obtain a correct score. Once the participants' scores were tabulated in the two different groups, tests of normality were conducted to ensure the normality of the data. Next, quantitative method of analysis was used to track the differences in their attainment of the target linguistic feature. Using SPSS software, the participants' scores were compared across tasks and in different occasions.

4. Analysis and Discussion

The first research question addressed the differences in the learning of English articles between the two groups of learners. To this end, the overall test scores of the participants in the pretest and posttest sessions were compared. Table 1 shows the statistical description of the participants' scores on both tests.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

Groups	Pretest (%)			Posttest (%)	
	N	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Individual	13	54.17	9.92	56.27	13.70
Pair	18	49.56	13.66	50.77	13.35

As can be seen, the mean scores of the pair and the individual groups are slightly different in the pre-test session; to make sure that the groups did not differ before starting the treatment sessions, their mean scores in the pretest were compared using an independent samples t-test. The results of this analysis showed no significant difference ($p=.330$), indicating that the study enjoyed a homogeneous population prior to the treatment ($p<.05$).

The next set of analyses concerned the scores of the two groups on the posttest session. As mentioned before, we employed two different tasks (editing and cloze tasks) both on the

pretest and posttest sessions. Therefore, similar to the analysis of the pretest, the overall test scores of the participants in the posttest were calculated and compared. Table:1 indicates that the learners in both groups progressed from the pretest to the posttest. The statistical description on this table shows a slight improvement for the pair group from the pretest to post-test (pre-test mean =49.56, post-test mean=50.77). However, if we meticulously detect these slight differences, again the individual group made an imperceptible more progress than the pair group (pre-test mean=54.17, post-test mean=56.27). In order to find out if there is any significant difference between the groups, the mean scores of the groups were compared



using another t-test. The result of this test indicated no significant difference between the study groups ($t=.790$, $p=.218$), indicating that the condition (pair or individual) may have no effect on learning English articles.

The next factor which may have an effect in the grammatical accuracy of target linguistic features is the task type; for instance, Storch (1999) employed three different tasks (cloze, composition and text reconstruction), each of which targeted four linguistic features. The results of her study suggested an overall positive effect on grammatical accuracy despite a negative effect for collaboration on the use of articles

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics of the Tasks

	Tasks	N	Mean (%)	SD
Pre-test	cloze	31	53.47	15.44
	editing	31	47.19	12.94
Post-test	cloze	31	56.02	14.01
	editing	31	50.48	15.02

On the basis of the descriptive statistics presented in Table 2, the overall task performance is an indication of the progress from the pretest to the posttest, though regarding the task type in each session (i.e. pretest and posttest), the cloze task is considerably more accurate than the editing task.

Table 3. Paired Samples t-test

	Mean difference	Std. Error Mean	t	df	sig
Cloze & Editing Pretest	6.279	2.575	2.438	30	.019
Cloze & Editing Posttest	5.544	2.376	2.333	30	.024

$p<.05$

From the table above, we can also see that the comparison of the mean scores of cloze and editing tasks during posttest shows a significant difference ($p=.024$), indicating the effect of task type on the performance of

in cloze task. On the other hand, the editing task in Baleghizadeh's (2010) study showed a positive effect for the use of pair work in accurate production of articles. Therefore, the assumption that different tasks may have mixed effects on the grammatical accuracy of English articles was addressed in our second research question. To this end, the learners' average accuracy scores obtained in each task during the pretest and posttest were calculated. The descriptive statistics for the participants' scores in both tasks are presented in Table 2 below.

Using paired samples t-test, the means of the two tasks in both tests were compared to see if a significant difference exists between the tasks regarding the accurate production of articles. Table 3 shows a significant effect for task type on the performance of the participants in the pretest session ($p=.019$).

the learners. This means that all participants significantly performed more accurately in the cloze task compared to the editing task.

As the results of the analysis indicate, there seems to be no superior effect of pair



work on learning English articles. The findings of the present study are in line with the results of some of the previous studies which targeted the use of articles and no significant difference was observed in the performance of the pairs and individuals. For instance, Storch (1999) reported a similar finding indicating that the use of pair work, despite enhancing the performance of her participants in some linguistic features, reduced the accuracy of article use on the cloze task. This finding is also in line with Nassaji and Tian's (2010) study, indicating that no learning occurred from the pretest to posttest and no differences were observed between the individuals and the pairs.

There are several justifications for the result of this study; one of them may be what Aljaafreh and Lantolf (1994) refer to as the negative feedback that may come up during pair and small group work. They argued that the negative feedback in pair and small group work may inhibit reliance on self in subsequent performance. Another justification for this finding may be the problem expressed by Ellis (2005) and other researchers over the use of pair and small group work such as not focusing on form on the part of the learners (for example, Williams, 2001). Some students find it more humiliating to make mistakes in front of their classmates than in front of their teachers (Prabhu, 1987) and student peers are not good models. Ellis (2005) continues that "social interaction between students does not by itself guarantee either a successful outcome for the task or the conditions that promote language learning" (p.24).

5. Conclusion

The results of this study indicated no significant difference between the individuals and pairs of learners in the acquisition of English articles after receiving two treatment sessions. Considering the level of students in

this study (low-intermediate), they may have provided each other with incorrect feedback. The negative feedback that come up in some interactions may hinder the reliance on self in subsequent occasions and as McDonough (2004) and Kinsella (1996) pointed out, the fear of learning the wrong grammar during collaboration may spoil the social nature of learning. Therefore, one implication for future studies being conducted on pair work interaction is to cast a cautious eye on the level of participants and include a mini-lesson prior to treatment sessions in order to expose learners to the correct linguistic forms. In regard to the complexity of some linguistic features, it seems reasonable to have more explicit instructions on some linguistic features and in a long term process. Working in pairs for several consecutive sessions might be more conducive to an accurate examination of such a complex linguistic feature as English article system.

During our observations of some of the interactions, we noticed that some peers disregarded the language question popped up by their less proficient peers and tried to accomplish the task by themselves. Thus, the learning opportunities emerging during interactions in pair and small group work in which the participants talk about the language (Swain, 1995) were ignored and instead task completion was prioritized. The same concern was articulated by McDonough (2004) and Foster (1998) who stated that "if students regard group work as a lighthearted activity and informal part of class, rather than as a pedagogical activity specifically designed to promote SLA, we can not be surprised if they are relaxed enough about communication problems to let them pass" (p. 19). This draws attention to the fact that teachers and researchers may need to instruct participants



how to interact during collaborative activities so that an effective collaboration occurs.

The limitations of the current study include the time budgeting and mixed gender of participants. The study was conducted over a period of one month, including a pretest, two treatment sessions, and a posttest. Given the fact that the study targeted a complex linguistic feature, further research is necessary to investigate the effects of output tasks in a longitudinal design. As to the results of the current study and the previous body of research, it seems rational to cast a doubtful eye on the use of pair work in EFL classes, at least in case of some linguistic features (for example, articles). However, with a small sample size, caution must be applied as the findings might not be transferrable to other contexts with larger populations.

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