

Enhancing the Ability of Iraqi EFL University Students to Speak in Small Groups

JASIM MOHAMMED ABBAS

Instructor

College of Arts, Al- Iraqiya University, Baghdad

Abstract:

In an EFL environment, many students suffer greatly when told that they will need to work in a group. However, group work has been found to be good for students to improve language skills. This study examines the effect of group work as part of cooperative learning in English language to enhance Iraqi EFL university students' speaking skills. Pre and post oral tests in addition to a survey questionnaire were employed to collect data of the study. In the administration of the data of the current study, 60 students were enrolled in the two instruments. First, the questionnaires were conducted to 60 students as the whole sample of the study before an English oral test prior to and after some small group instructional activities was administered to 15 students selected from the sample of the study. The data were analyzed quantitatively using mean scores. The findings revealed that through small groups (cooperative learning), students interact and express themselves more to their peers or classmates during instructional episodes. As a result, the students' speaking abilities considerably improved after applying the small group technique. In the regard of the results, the researcher recommends that the instructors should make use of adopting small groups speaking in their classes which may in turn enhance students' speaking ability.

Key words: small groups, group work, cooperative learning, speaking skill, EFL environment

1. INTRODUCTION

In the era of development and globalization, the need for speaking mastery in English is urgent due to the fact that English is treated and considered as the dominated means of international communication. However, learners of English and particularly EFL learners encounter serious difficulties in speaking since they lack the ability to employ language appropriately in social interactions (Malmir and Shoorcheh, 2012). According to them, such interaction can show, to a wider extent, how students learn. Speaking in a second or foreign language has been viewed as the most demanding of the four language skills. Hence, Cabaysa and Baetiong (2011) asserted that considerable knowledge strategies can further enhance students' speaking abilities. Considering the major importance of speaking skill, Tsay and Brady (2010) stated that many educators are following a number of active learning pedagogies, such as cooperative or team-based learning.

Cooperative learning is a pedagogical practice designed for promoting academic achievement and socialization. A considerable number of past studies declared that students gain both academically and socially when they have opportunities to interact with others to achieve shared targets (Slavin, 1996; Johnson and Johnson, 2002; Gillies and Boyle, 2010). Thus, cooperative learning, or small group work is seen as an important element for enhancing speaking skill for language learners, especially for EFL learners. According to Wasley (2006), "Students who participate in collaborative learning and educational activities outside the classroom and who interact more with faculty members get better grades, are more satisfied with their education, and more likely to remain in college" (A. 39).

This paper is intended to offer suggestions on how to use small groups in order to assist Iraqi EFL university students to enhance their abilities to speak well. It will explain the merits

and advantages of working in small groups as a solution of the students' weaknesses in speaking skill.

1.1 Significance of Small groups as Cooperative Learning

The importance of the study is based on the fact that small groups technique as a means of cooperative learning plays a vital role in language learning strategy. Based on this, the rationale of the present research is that adopting such technique is directed to increase social interaction among students and consequently leads to improving communication skills among them. To the researcher's knowledge, there are no past studies which investigated the Iraqi students' weakness in the speaking skill and aimed to find solutions for the problem through cooperative learning. There is insufficient effort in EFL context, particularly in Iraq to make any firm remarks on the centrality of using small groups technique as cooperative learning in the teaching and learning of English. Thus, the current research is intended to be of a great value for university teachers through using the up-to-date teaching methods suggested by this study.

Previous research confirmed that there are a number of advantages that can be obtained through group work. According to Beebe and Masreson (2003) as cited in Bruke (2011), six advantages are normally observed in small group work. These advantages are presented as follows:

1. Groups have more information than a single individual. More information and resources could be available in groups due to the variety of backgrounds and experiences.
2. Groups stimulate creativity. In respect of problem solving, the principle applied is that "two heads are better than one".
3. Students can remember group discussions better. Group learning fosters learning and comprehension. Students working in small groups normally have a tendency to learn more of what is taught and retain it longer than when the same material is

presented in other instructional formats (Barkley, Cross & Major, 2005; Davies, 1993).

4. Decisions which students can make yield greater satisfaction. Studies suggest that students who are engaged in group problem solving are more committed to the solution and are better satisfied with their participation in the group than those who were not involved.

5. Students gain better understanding of themselves. Small group work allows students to gain more accurate picture of how others see them. The feedback that they receive may assist them better evaluate their interpersonal behavior.

6. Team work is highly valued by employers. Based on Graduate Outlook Survey (2010), well developed interpersonal skills were graded by employers among the top 10 skills sought after in university graduates.

In addition to what has been stated above in accordance with the advantages of small groups technique, it is worth mentioning that there are various kinds of groups which are considered as key components that differentiate cooperative learning from any random process of putting students into groups to learn (Johnson, Johnson, and Smith 2006). Based on the authors' classification, there are five types of groups starting from:

a. *Positive interdependence* which refers to the idea that students are put together in groups to work as to achieve common learning objectives. In this type, students should help each other in that one student cannot succeed if others do not succeed. They need each other for support, explanations, and guidance. Without the help of one member, the group will not be able to achieve the intended objective.

b. *Individual accountability*: it indicates that each member in a group is responsible for his/her share of responsibility for the group's success. As Jolliffe (2007) identifies, it is important that the group members know the needs of others and know that they cannot "hitchhike" on the work of others. It requires each

student in the group to develop a sense of personal responsibility to learn and assist the rest of the group to learn also.

c. *Promotive interaction* which denotes the verbal interaction of students so as to help each other accomplish the task and the group's goals. In this type, students are required to interact verbally with each other on learning tasks (Johnson & Johnson, 2008). Different things are expected to be explained by the students and they sometimes teach others and provide each other with help, support, and encouragement.

d. *Interpersonal and social skills*: it refers to certain skills such as giving constructive feedback, reaching consensus, communication accurately and unambiguously and involving each member in the learning process. Since not all students know these skills, they must be taught and practiced them before the group initiate a learning task. Therefore, teachers should carefully and explicitly teach their students the required skills. In such case, the teacher is not a person who can measure the performance of the students in terms of the final product. Instead, someone else like a friend, coordinator, director, guide, counselor, and facilitator can do the task (Cowe et al., 1994).

e. *Group processing* is the final group which the study suggests to be the sample of the small groups technique that could be followed by the Iraqi teachers or instructors for enhancing the students' speaking skills. It is an important aspect of cooperative learning which requires group members to assess their functions and contribution to the success of all tasks. This type concentrates on positive behaviors and actions rather than on negative ones and involves students thinking about how they learn. Further, the teacher may spend time focusing on improving a skill such as speaking. The teacher can then monitor the different groups during the learning activities and provide feedback on what has been observed.

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

As in the most Arab educational systems, Iraqi educational system is rather traditional one in which English classes are teacher-centered (Edge, 1999). Arabic students in general and Iraqi students in particular are found to face various difficulties in speaking skill (Rababa'h, 2002). These difficulties are mainly attributed to the influence of the Arabic language which is used as the medium of communication instead of English. The frequent use of Arabic by the students is due to the traditional method in teaching English in classroom context which is viewed as a source of activation task that makes the process of teaching and learning in Arab classes seems monotone and contributes to this problem. In such case, students are not highly motivated to express their views and attitudes. Instead, little communication and interaction between students and teachers in the class are insufficient to enhance students' speaking skill.

In tertiary level, students in different universities are not provided with real opportunities in which they can spend enough time to use English orally in their daily situations to express their needs and accordingly improve their speaking abilities. It has been reported that speaking practices in Iraqi universities have not managed to enhance students' progress in speaking (Fahad, 2012). This problem is rooted back to the insufficient practice in secondary schools in which the class administration is based on teacher who is considered to be the authority of the classroom and students are not given practices to enhance their speaking skills. Keong and Mohammed (2015) demonstrated that the techniques utilized in teaching English as a foreign language to Iraqi secondary students are competitive and test-driven. The students are encouraged to learn what is probably assigned for the exams. The study also showed that most of the students in the classroom are passive

recipient of information and rarely take decisions towards oral participation.

The effect of the method of teaching in Iraqi syllabus could have been easily observed in the students' abilities to produce simple utterances in their daily situations. According to Abu Ghazala (2006), most Iraqi EFL students do not have the ability to form simple and short sentences, paragraphs, and letters because of the teaching techniques that most English teachers and instructors follow in their classroom. Moreover, Jasim (2012) illustrated in his empirical study that Iraqi learners of English are weak in speaking tasks and unable to express themselves in simple English discourse.

3. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the present study is:

1. To find out the effect of small groups technique as being part of cooperative learning on enhancing Iraqi university students' speaking skill.
2. To identify the way students consider speaking in groups inside and outside the classroom.

4. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. To what extent does small groups technique affect the speaking skills of Iraqi university students?
2. How do Iraqi university students consider speaking in groups inside and outside their classes?

5. METHODOLOGY

5.1 Sample of the Study

The participants of the study were 60 students majoring in the third year of the English Department at the Iraqiya University in the Academic Year 2017/ 2018. The subjects were all Iraqi

studying English as a foreign language and as their field of study. They were of similar age, ranging from 20 to 22 years. Among the 60 students as the whole population of the study, the sample of the descriptive study was 15 students who were distributed to three groups with 5 students in each. On the other hand, all the 60 students were asked to answer the questionnaires. The rationale behind choosing a third-year sample for the study comes from the fact that third-year students in the English Department have enough experience of the nature of speaking skill class which they already practiced in the first two years of their academic study.

5.2 Instruments

The study used two instruments for data collection. The first one was speaking pre-test and post-test to measure students' English speaking performance. The tests contain three tasks: talking about a scene differences, reading a text aloud, and expressing one's opinion about a particular topic. The scoring rubric of the test provided a measure of quality of performance on the basis of five criteria: pronunciation, grammatical accuracy, vocabulary, fluency and interactive communication on five-rating scale in which each category was given (20 %) of the final scoring. All the items in the speaking test were reviewed by the researcher and validated by two experts of an experience which exceeds to ensure the content validity of the speaking pre and post-tests.

The second instrument is a questionnaire which was used to measure students' point of view about how the speaking skill is taught to them in their classroom and the way they consider group work to enhance their abilities to speak English inside and outside their classroom.

5.3 Procedures

First, a questionnaire, which aimed to test the students' attitudes towards the small group strategy, was given to 60

students in their third-year in the Department of English. Then, a pre-test of oral performance was given to 15 students in which students were asked a number of oral questions on different topics to test their ability in the speaking skill. A week later, the 15 students were given a practice in which they were trained to speak in group work. They were divided into three groups each consisted 5 students. Such strategy is clearly different from the traditional method of teaching speaking skill they used to follow in their classes. However, the students were given the chance to select their group member to work with on during the two week training given to them. Throughout the group work each member had to present a topic. Then, each group discussed a certain topic, exchanged ideas, helped each other and shared knowledge. Each group member was assigned a role and responsibility that must be fulfilled. At the end of the study, a post-test of oral performance was given to the students.

5.4 Analysis

For the analysis of the data of the study, quantitative analysis was used. To find out the effect of small groups technique on speaking ability, descriptive statistics including mean scores and standard deviations of the pre and post-tests were used. On the other hand, SPSS descriptive statistics was used to analyze the students' attitudes towards speaking in small groups.

6. FINDINGS

The findings of the study are presented and displayed according to the questions of the study. The data obtained from the pre and post-test and the questionnaires were analyzed and interpreted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

Research question 1: To what extent does small groups technique affect the speaking skills of Iraqi university students? The analysis of the findings indicated that the overall

average mean score of the pre-test was 40.3 with a standard deviation of 15, while that of the post-test was 49 with a standard deviation of 16. As Table 1 shows, the students' speaking performance mean score in the post-test was higher than that of the pre-test.

Table 1. Overall average mean-scores and standard deviation of the pre- and post-tests

Test	Students No.	Mean	Std Deviation
Pre-test	15	40.3	15
Post-test	15	49	16

In related terms, the students' speaking performance in all five criteria mentioned earlier in the explanation of the instruments of the study was higher in the post- test than the pre-test. The scores in interactive communication and fluency were the highest followed by those in vocabulary, grammatical accuracy and pronunciation respectively. Table 2 shows the performance in the five criteria in the pre and post-tests.

Table 2. Performance in the five criteria in the pre- and post-tests

Criterion	Performance	
	Pre-test	Post-test
pronunciation	7.3	8.3
grammatical accuracy	8.9	10.1
vocabulary	8.3	9.6
fluency	7.9	9.9
Interactive communication	7.3	11.1

Research question 2: How do Iraqi university students consider speaking in groups inside and outside their classes? To answer the second research question a questionnaire was administered to the whole sample of the study (60 students). The responses of the students indicated that the majority of students see themselves speak English moderately and with difficulty. In addition, most of them reported that university is considered the best place in which they can use English language. However, only 32 students indicated that they

sometimes speak in their classes. Further, 16 students mentioned that they speak English only when the instructor asks them. As related to the group work, only 8 students mentioned that they speak English with classmates.

Additionally, in a response to the item 12 (Appendix A) 32 students responded that they normally use Arabic as the medium language whereas 12 answered that they sometimes speak English with their classmate or friends. Other 12 students indicated that they do not speak English in their free time. Table 3. below explains the participants' responses to the questionnaire items.

Table 3. Students' responses to the questionnaires

Item	Students No.			
	Students' evaluation of their speaking ability	Fairly fluency	moderately	With difficulty
	6	22	20	12
Place of speaking English	At university	In my free time	At work	I do not use English
	49	11		
Speaking English in class	In groups with my classmates	Only the instructor asks me	sometimes	I do not speak English
	8	16	32	4
Speaking English in free time	I always speak English with my classmates or friends	I sometimes speak English with my classmates or friends	I do not speak English	I normally use Arabic as the medium language
		12	12	34

In addition to what has been stated above, the majority of the students who participated in the questionnaire reported that they normally see or hear English at their place of study. And they expressed their high ambition to improve their ability to speak English well by indicating that attending a certain institutes could be very positive to improve the English speaking skill. That's why they feel admired and proud when they see or hear a famous Iraqi or Arab person speak English fluently.

7. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal a number of positive and promising outcomes in the respect of Iraqi EFL university students' actual performance in speaking in small groups as one technique of collaborative learning being a new instructional method in English speaking in classroom in Iraq. The findings of the study are discussed based on the participants' responses to the items of the two instruments used in this study.

As indicated in the analysis of the results, the first instrument used in the study aimed to answer the first research question and elicit information on how group work or small group could enhance the Iraqi University students' ability to speak well. So, it could be argued that the performance of the students in the post-test after they received a two week training showed some difference and was better than theirs in the pre-test. According to the results explained in the last section, the students showed a certain improvement in all the five criteria on which the students' speaking skill was assessed. In related words, interactive communication and fluency were the most criteria in which the students showed improvement in their speaking skill. This could be due to the fact that the students were given the opportunity to interact and communicate with each other in the technique of small group. The technique of small groups provided good time to express and change different opinions, views and ideas. That's why they found it suitable for them to practice the English language freely and without certain limitations.

On the other hand, the findings of the questionnaire answered the second research question which aimed to find out how Iraqi EFL university students consider the speaking in small groups inside and outside their classes. According to the responses of the participants, the majority of the students reported that they speak English sometimes in class and only

when the instructor asks them. Also, most of them indicated that university is the normal place in which they can sometimes speak English. This shows that they don't usually practice English language outside their classes either in groups or in two person conversation. Moreover, the majority of the students explained that they can speak English moderately or with difficulty which indicates that they haven't practiced the technique of group work inside or outside their class.

8. FURTHER RESEARCH

The discussion of this study implies that cooperative learning represented in small group work could enhance the speaking skill of the university students. As explained earlier the skill that the study has investigated was speaking. Hence, future research could also focus on whether the same results will be achieved if another skill will be investigated. Future research could also replicate the same study on another sample, secondary school or non-departmental students. Based on the findings of the current study, it is recommended that English university instructors should adopt small groups technique as part of cooperative learning as an effective learning method to enhance Iraqi university students' speaking skill. In the light of the findings and the other empirical findings, it is also recommended that small groups technique should be part of the daily instructional methods used in all the instructors teaching and training programs in English Departments in Iraqi Universities. It is the responsibility of the English instructors to be aware of the needs and preferences that students require in enhancing their speaking skill. Such technique should be tested and applied on different stages of the tertiary level in the English Departments. It also could be tested on other levels of education, such as elementary and secondary. Therefore, designers of textbooks, English instructors and teachers,

academic institutes and prospective researchers could get benefit from the results of the current study.

9. CONCLUSION

Small groups technique as part of cooperative learning is considered as student-centered approach that aims to enhance speaking skill among Iraqi university students in this study. Therefore, English instructors in Iraqi universities who teach English speaking skills require to be aware of the benefits and importance of small group technique. There are positive changes and improvements when the method of teaching the speaking skill has been changed towards a more student-centered approach. English instructor in Iraqi universities need to master the types of speaking techniques to be applied in the form of group work. Hence, instructors are encouraged to practice this method regularly and effectively. In this respect, there is overwhelming evidence that cooperative learning represented by small groups has a positive effect on both enhancing the students' speaking skill and their views towards this technique inside and outside their classes. Finally, it could be said that although there is perfect methodology, small groups technique is an instructional method which is effective in enhancing the speaking skill of Iraqi university students.

REFERENCES

1. Abu Ghazala, I. (2006). The effect of using a comprehensive approach for teaching high frequency words on developing the writing skills of seventh grades in Gaza. Unpublished M.A thesis. Islamic University of Gaza, Gaza.

2. Barkley, E. F., Cross, K. P., and Major, C. H. (2005). *Collaborative learning techniques: A handbook for college faculty*. San Francisco; Jossey-Bass Publishers.
3. Beebe, S. A., and Masreson, J. T. (2003). *Communicating in small groups*. Pearson Education Inc. Boston: Massachusetts.
4. Byuke, A. (2011). Group work: How to use groups effectively. *The Journal of Effective Teaching*, 11(2), 87-95.
5. Cabaysa, C. C., and Baetiong, L. R. (2011). Language learning strategies of students at different levels of speaking proficiency. *Education Quarterly*, 68(1).
6. Cowei, H. (1994). Co-operative group work: a perspective from the U.K. *International Journal of Educational Research* (special issue on co-operative learning in social contexts).
7. Davies, B. G. (1993). *Tools for Teaching*. Jossey-Bass Inc., San Francisco: California.
8. Edge, J. (1999). *Essentials of English Language Teaching*, (6th ed.). New York: Longman.
9. Fahad, A. K. (2012). Enhancing students' communicative skills through classroom interaction in Iraqi EFL class. College of Education, University of Thiqrar.
10. Gillies, R. M., and Bayle, M. (2010). Teacher's reflections on cooperative learning: Issues of implementation. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 26, 933-940.
11. Jasim, T. M. (2012). Poor writing in English: A case study of the Iraqi EFL learners in Misan province.
12. Johnson, O., and Johnson, R. (2002). Learning together and alone: Overview and meta-analysis. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 22, 95-105.
13. Johnson, D. W., and Johnson, R. T. (2008). Social interdependence theory and cooperative learning: The teacher's role. In Gillies, R. M., Ashman, A., & Terwel, J. (Eds.), *Teacher's role in implementing cooperative*

- learning in the classroom* (pp. 9-37). New York, U.S.A: Springer. http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/978-70892-8_1.
14. Johnson, D. W., Johnson, R. T., and Smith, M. B. (2006). *Active learning: Cooperation in the college classroom*. Edina, MN: Interaction Book Company.
 15. Jolliffe, W. (2007). *Cooperative learning in the classroom: Putting it into practice*. Paul Chapman. Retrieved on October 14, 2016 from [a4C&pg=PA1&dq=cooperative+learning&lr](http://www.philster.com/Artich).
 16. Keong, Y. C., and Mohammed, A. H. (2015). Improving Iraqi secondary students' speaking performance through problem-based learning approach. *International Journal of Education and Research*, 3(12).
 17. Malmir, A., and Sharcheh, S. (2012). An investigation of the impact of teaching critical thinking on the Iranian EFL learners' speaking skill. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 3(4), 608-617.
 18. Rababa'h, G. (2003). Communication problems facing Arab learners of English. *Journal of English & learning*, 3(1), 180-197.
 19. Slavin, R. (1996). Research on cooperative learning and achievement test in March. Retrieved on October 05, 2016 from <http://www.philster.com/Artich>
 20. Tsang, M., and Brady, M. (2010). A case study of cooperative learning and communication pedagogy: Does working in teams make a difference? *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and learning*, 10(2), 78-89.
 21. Wasley, P. (2006). Underrepresented students benefit from 'engagement'. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 53(13), A39.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Questionnaire

1. What is your mother language?
 - a) Arabic
 - b) Kurdish
 - c) Others
2. Do you consider yourself to be..?
 - a) Monolingual
 - b) Bilingual
 - c) Multilingual
 - d) No opinion
3. How important is English to your personality?
 - a) Very important
 - b) Moderately important
 - c) Not very important
 - d) No opinion
4. Where do you see or hear English?
 - a) At my place of study
 - b) In public places
 - c) At home
 - d) No opinion
5. English is spoken in a different way in different countries. Which of the following language variety appeals to you the most?
 - a) British English
 - b) American English
 - c) Other, what,
 - d) I do not recognize different ways of speaking English
6. What is your opinion about the fact that some Iraqi students attend English- speaking institutes?
 - a) Very positive
 - b) Moderately positive
 - c) Moderately negative
 - d) Very negative
 - e) No opinion
7. How do you feel when you hear a famous Iraqi or Arabic person speaking English poorly on the TV or the radio?
 - a) Admiration for a good effort
 - b) Pride in having better language skills
 - c) Sympathy
 - d) Embarrassment
 - e) No feeling at all

8. How do you feel when you hear a famous Iraqi or Arabic person speaking English on the TV or on the radio fluently?

- a) Pride in Iraqi and Arabs
- b) Pride in having better language skills yourself
- c) Admiration of the speaker
- d) Irritation
- e) No feeling at all

9. How do you evaluate your skills in English according to the options below?
Fluently Fairly fluently Moderately With difficulty Only a few words
Not at all

- a) I speak English
- b) I write English
- c) I read English
- d) I understand spoken English

10. Where do you use English the most?

- a) At university
- b) In my free time
- c) At work
- d) I do not use English

11. In your class, do you speak English?

- a) In groups with my classmates
- b) Only when the instructor asks me
- c) Sometimes
- d) I do not speak English

12. In your free time, do you speak English?

- a) I always speak English with my classmates or friends
- b) I sometimes speak English with my classmates or friends
- c) I do not speak English
- d) I normally use Arabic as the medium language

Thank you