

# Socio-cultural Theory: the Study of the Effect of Group Interaction on Improving Iranian EFL learners' Speaking Ability

Mohammadreza Esmaeili Chinijani (PhD candidate)

Department of ELT, College of Humanities, Ahar Branch, Islamic Azad University, Ahar, Iran

Nader Assadi Aidinlou (PhD)

Department of ELT, College of Humanities, Ahar Branch, Islamic Azad University, Ahar, Iran

## Abstract

Literally speaking, speaking skill is at the heart of the language learning. For English as foreign language learners speaking English equals to learning it. Thus the current study was an attempt to suggest an effective strategy for efficient speaking for EFL learners. In doing so the researcher studied the effectiveness of the group interaction on sixty intermediate female learners at one the institutes of Tehran. Iran. The quasi-experimental study lasted for one educational semester. The findings indicated that group interaction enhances speaking in effective manner. The high scores of the experimental group might be due to the advantages of group interaction such as increasing students' talking time, opportunity to mimic real time conversations, creating a more secure, pleasant, and positive classroom atmosphere.

**Keywords:** Socio-cultural theory, group interaction, Iranian Intermediate EFL Learners, speaking ability

## 1.1 Introduction

Burns & Joyce, (1997) defined Speaking as an interactive process of creating meaning that entails producing, receiving and processing information. In speaking form and meaning are dependent on the context in which it arises, the interlocutors, and the objectives of speaking. Literally speaking there are two main approaches to define speaking; bottom-up and the top down. For Bygate (1987)" traditionally the focus in speaking was on motor perceptive skills. Within this context, speaking is defined as the production of auditory signals designed to produce differential verbal responses in a listener. It is considered as combining sounds in a systematic way, according to language specific principles to form meaningful utterances, this approach is adopted by audio-lingual's" (5-6). Thus when it comes to speaking the mentioned approach says that in teaching speaking ,we need to begin with small sound units and then continue mastering of words and sentences and eventually discourse. There is an important point here; this approach fails to notice interactive and social aspect of speaking. Top down view of speaking said by Bygate (1998) includes interactional skills which involve making decision about communication. On the importance of speaking skill Aamer Qureshi (2011) states:

“The English language has become an international language. Among nations it serves as a lingua franca. It is spoken, learnt and understood even in those countries where it is not a native’s language. English is playing a major role in many sectors including medicine, engineering, education, advanced studies, business, technology, banking, computing, tourism etc. All our software development today, the communication facilities available to us through internet, our access to a variety of websites, are all being carried out in English. Most of the research works are conducted and compiled in English. Anything written and recorded in this language is read and listened to, in wider circles. As a result, English is being taught and learned around the world as a second language today”(p.10).

## 1.2 Research Question and Hypothesis

### *Research question:*

Are there any significant differences in the effects of Group Interaction on Improving Iranian EFL learners’ Speaking Ability?

### *Null hypothesis:*

There are no significant differences in the effects of Group Interaction on Improving Iranian EFL learners’ Speaking Ability.

## 2. Review of the Related Literature

### *2.1 Socio-cultural theory*

Socio-cultural theory results from the work of seminal psychologist Lev Vygotsky(1978), who supposed that parents, caregivers, peers, and the culture are generally responsible for developing higher order functions. Vygotsky(1978) was a modern thinker amongst other great thinkers such as Freud, Skinner, and Piaget, but his early death at age 37 and suppression of his work in Stalinist Russia left him in relative gloom until quite recently. In Vygotsky’s(1978) socio-cultural theory of human learning, learning is described as a social process and the initiation of human intelligence in society or culture. The fundamental idea of Vygotsky’s (1978) theoretical structure is that social interaction is of an essential function in the development of cognition. Vygotsky (1978) believed everything has been understood on two levels: firstly through interaction with others, and then integrating into the individual’s mental structure.

For Vygotsky(1978)” Every function in the child’s cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people (inter- psychological) and then inside the child (intra- psychological). This applies equally to voluntary attention, to logical memory, and to the formation of concepts. All the higher functions originate as actual relationships between individuals”. (p.57).

One of the key elements of Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural approach is his idea of a Zone of Proximal Development. Frequently abbreviated as ZPD, the Zone of Proximal Development is a

way to measure a child's ability to learn and rise. Vygotsky (1978) considered that the ZPD was a extremely more effective way to measure a child's intelligence than through the standard academic testing, which can frequently fail to explain cultural differences considering learning. At the core of Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development, there is the area including the cognitive abilities which people have obtained thus far in life. According to some researchers individuals' cognition and motivation start off in contexts and, accordingly, relate intimately to the external world (Phan, Maebuta, & Dorovolomo, 2010; Walker, et al., 2004).

## **2.2 Group Interaction**

Asking students work in groups and pairs has turned into a common practice of English classrooms for improving speaking skill. The importance of interaction in the process of language learning has been emphasized by many researchers. For instance Kumaravadivelu (2003), states "L2 learning and teaching environment must include opportunities for learners to engage in meaningful interaction which competent speakers of the target language" (p.101). He believes that meaningful interaction will enhance the likelihood of a greater amount of input becoming available, therefore significantly enhancing the opportunities for the activation of essential processes that are indispensable to L2 development. There are some processes in the act of interaction. The best description of the interaction was given by Mc Grath (1984):

"When two or more people interact-that is, when they do something together rather complex set of processes take place. That interaction can be viewed in terms of three stages or modes. First a behavior by one member (A), verbal or otherwise can be regarded as a communication from A to others (B, C, and so on). A series of such behaviors, by a set of interacting persons, can be regarded as the communication process. The form or structure of such a series of interactive behaviors or communications entails such factors as the communication channels and modalities used the distribution of acts among persons and over time. That form or structure can be regarded as a communication pattern. Each such behavior also can be considered with respect to its content. In principle, every interactive behavior can be regarded as having both a task component and an interpersonal component. The task oriented aspects of the participants' activities can be viewed as the task or action process, which results in a task performance pattern. The interpersonal oriented aspects of those activities can be viewed as the attraction or acquaintance process, which results in an interpersonal relationship pattern. The third stage of the interaction process has to do with its impact. The three patterns resulting from the interaction in turn have effects on one another and on the participants. Such effects constitute the influence process, which involves the outcomes or consequences of the interaction for the participants, for their relationships to one another, for their task performance and for their subsequent communications" (P.17).

Richards et al (1992) reported that "classroom interaction refers to the patterns of verbal and non-verbal communication and the types of social relationships which occur within classrooms that may be a part of studies of classroom discourse, teacher talk and second language acquisition" (p. 150).

## **3. Methodology**

### 3.1 Subjects

A total of 60 female language learners with an age range of 16-21 contributed in this study. They were all picked from Persian background. The subjects were selected from 5 classes. Prior to starting the program, a proficiency test (*pet test*) was run to the subjects with the intention of assuring the comparability of proficiency levels of the learners. A pre-test on speaking was accomplished to the both groups of experimental and control for homogeneity of the speaking ability of the subjects.

### 3.2 Context of Study

The subjects were English language learners of the one of the institutes in Tehran. Iran. In this organization courses consist of 15 sessions which meet one time a week. By and large the second edition of the '*American English File*' by

### 3.3 Design of the study

The design of the current study is quasi-experimental, specifically without random assignment. Classic experimental study takes in at least one control group with the aim of comparing the findings of both groups. In the present study sixty female learners were divided into two groups, one as experimental and the other as control.

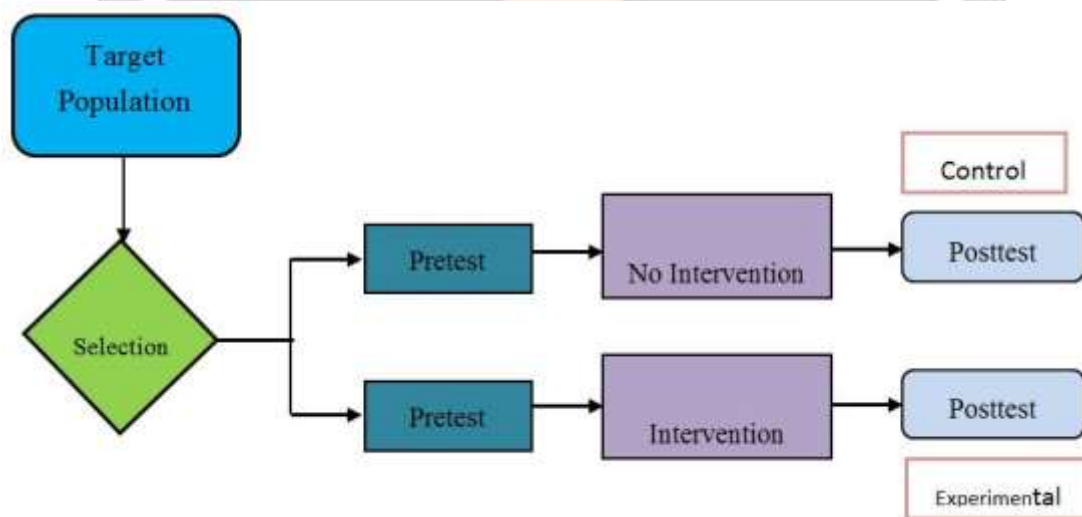


Figure 3.3 Quasi-experimental design

### 3.4 Materials

With the aim of collecting experimental data the researchers made use of the following materials were used:

1. **Pet- test** for evaluating language proficiency of the subjects
2. PC computer.
3. American File dialogues.
4. Pretest of speaking
5. Post-test of speaking

### 3.5 Procedures

Subsequent to getting permission for collecting data from the dean of the institutes of Tehran Iran, and prior to starting the course, a *pet -test* was applied to both groups including Listening, speaking, reading, and writing. After solving the problem of controlling proficiency level of the subjects, a pre-test on speaking skill of the subjects was applied to make a decision on the comparability of speaking ability of the participants before the intervention. In the pre-test of speaking students were made to speak on different subjects. Topic relevance, the words that students used, the intonation, pronunciation and verbal fluency received importance for the act of scoring. Later the researchers instigated the lessons. throughout 15 weeks of teaching time, which consisted of 90-minutes for every week, students of the experimental group learnt English speaking through group interactions which were due to the topics of the American File .There were 3 PCs in the class for watching the movies of the American File DVDs in three groups ten subjects in each. More explicitly in the experimental group subjects sat and watched the dialogues and then were asked to interact with each other on the same vein, they need to help each other to understand the lessons. After 15 sessions a post-test was run to both groups for measuring the helpfulness of the intervention. The scores were assigned and analyzed by means of SPSS. Given that there were only two groups in the study the researchers made use of t-test for analysis.

### 4. Results and Discussion

Consistent with design of the current study and since there were two groups (one as control and the other as experimental), the researchers aimed at comparing the means of the groups both



in pre-tests and in post-tests. The researchers planned to prove that the group interaction would enhance speaking, so the scores in the experimental would be enhanced in the post-test and this should be described numerically. Due to the fact that the groups are independent as a result for comparing their means with each other the researcher used independent t-test.

**Table 1. Paired Samples Statistics-Control Group**

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Pretest	13.222	30	1.688	0.307
	Posttest	14.241	30	1.366	0.248

Indicated in the Table 1, the control group of the study had a mean score of 13.222 ( $SD=1.688$ ) in the pretest. The group, however, scored higher ( $M=14.241$ ,  $SD=1.366$ ) in the posttest. It can be seen that there was an increase in the speaking scores from Pretest to Posttest for the participants in the control group.

**Table 2. Paired Samples Test- Control Group**

		Mean	Std. Deviation	Paired Differences			t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
				Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Posttest - Pretest	-.161	1.117	.202	-.587	0.260	-.817	29	0.424

Table 2 portrays that the mean increase in the speaking scores was -.161 with a 95% confidence interval ranging from -.587 to 0.260. It is also indicated that the mean increase in the speaking posttest was not statistically significant ( $t= (29) = -.817$ ,  $P= 0.424$ ).

**Table.3. Paired Samples Statistics-Experimental Group**

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 2	Pretest	13.421	30	1.844	0.342
	Posttest	18.644	30	1.228	0.221

Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics for the experimental group. Through a brief look, it can be seen that there was a statistically significant increase in the speaking scores from Pretest ( $M= 13.421$ ,  $SD= 1.848$ ) to Posttest ( $M= 18.644$ ,  $SD=1.228$ ).

**Table 4 Paired Samples Test- Experimental Group**

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Posttest - Pretest	-4.800	1.255	0.222	-5.044	-4.133	-19.799	29	0.000

As shown in the Table4, the mean increase in the speaking scores was -4.800 with a 95% confidence interval ranging from -5.044 to -4.133. The mean increase in the speaking posttest was statistically significant ( $t = (29) = -19.799, P = 0.000$ ). Concerning the control group, the experimental group performed much better in the speaking posttest. Consequently, the Alternative Hypothesis is supported and the Null hypothesis is rejected.

**Table 5. Descriptive Statistics-Pretest**

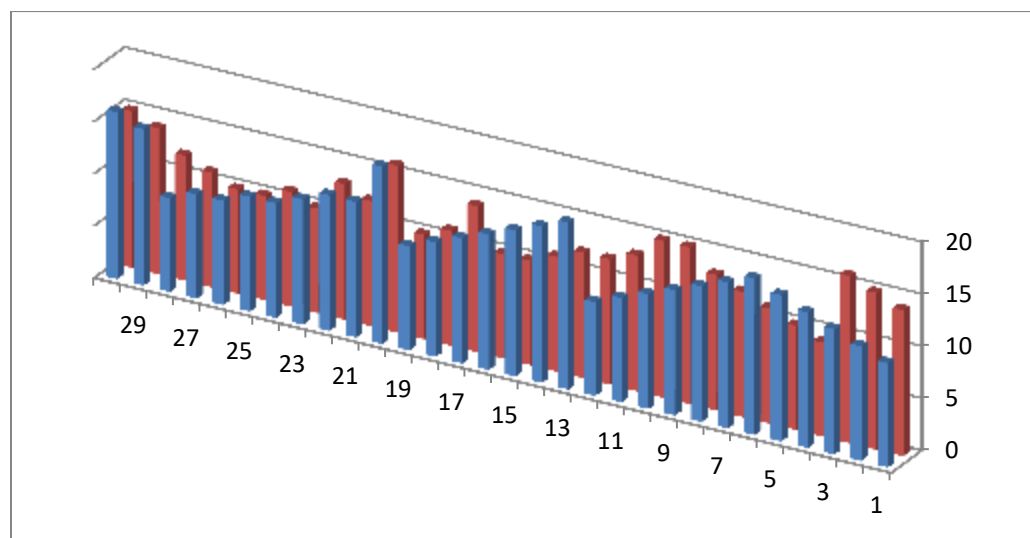
		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pretest	Control	30	13.222	1.688	0.307
	Experimental	30	13.421	1.844	0.342

Table 5 represents the descriptive statistics for the speaking pretests. The experimental and control groups of the study had a mean score of 13.421 ( $SD=1.844$ ) and 13.22 ( $SD=1.688$ ) in that order. To be precise, the two groups did not perform differently in the pretest and they were harmonized in terms of their speaking performance.

**Table 6. Independent Samples Test-Pretest**

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference
									Lower Upper
Pretest	Equal variances assumed	0.337	0.565	0.448	58	0.665	0.200	0.459	-0.715 1.117
	Equal variances not assumed			0.448	57.505	0.665	0.200	0.459	-0.715 1.117

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the statistics scores of experimental and control groups in the speaking pretest. The mean difference in statistics scores was 0.200 with a 95% confidence interval ranging from -.715 to 1.117. The results exposed no significant difference between the mean scores of experimental and control groups in the speaking pretest  $t(58) = 0.448, p = 0.665$ . Hence, the two groups performed consistently in the speaking pretest.



**Pretest Control**

**Pretest Experimental**

**Figure. 1 pretest**

The Figure 1 proves the homogeneity of the groups in the speaking pretest. Both groups presented rather equal performances in the pretest of speaking.

**Table 7. Descriptive Statistics-Posttest**

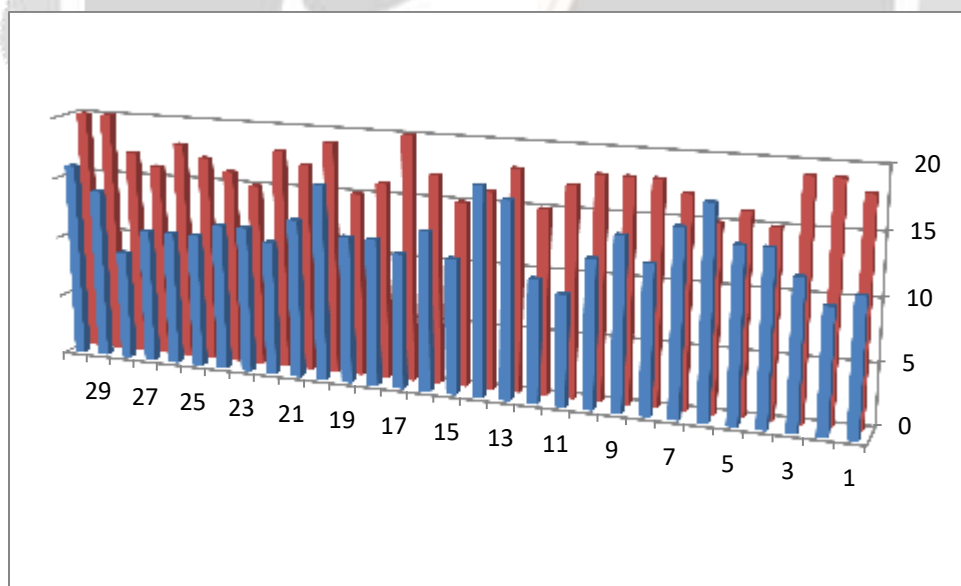
	Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Posttest	Control	30	14.241	1.366	0.248
	Experimental	30	18.644	1.228	0.221

The descriptive statistics in Table 7 also indicated that the experimental group performed much better than the control group in the speaking posttest. The mean score for the former was 18.64 ( $SD= 1.248$ ) whereas for the latter the mean score is 14.24 ( $SD= 1.366$ ).



Table 8. Independent Samples Test-Posttest										
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Posttest	Equal variances assumed	0.00	0.99	-12.66	58	0.00	-4.24	0.33	-4.80	-3.59
	Equal variances not assumed			-12.66	57.31	0.00	-4.24	0.33	-4.80	-3.59

Another independent-samples *t*-test was run to match up the statistics scores of the groups in the speaking posttest. The mean difference in statistics scores was -4.24 with a 95% confidence interval ranging from -4.80 to -3.59. The results made known significant difference between the mean scores of experimental and control groups in the speaking posttest  $t(58) = -12.66, p = 0.00$ . Then, the Null hypothesis is rejected and the Researcher hypothesis has been supported.



Post-test Control

Post-test Experimental

Figure 2. Posttest

The figure presents the significant difference in the speaking posttest of study, namely the experimental group high scored in the posttest.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

In the current study we tried to help language learners to improve their speaking performance through group interactions. In the experimental group learners outperformed in the post-test of speaking, thus the treatment was proved to be efficient and successful. The high scores of the group resulted from the advantages of the interaction and socio-cultural theory of learning. The first and probably the most influential feature in the results was increased time for speaking, it is also emphasized by Long and Porter (1985);

“In a 50 minute lesson with 30 students, if the students talked only to the teacher, they would get 30 seconds of talking time per lesson. They estimate that this equals “just one hour per student per year” (p. 208).

The second reason for the results was that there was opportunity for learners to mimic genuine English conversations. While in normal circumstances the language learning classrooms can never precisely repeat the experience of using a language in a real situation. The classroom environment was full of fun and a relaxed one, thus learners felt free and secure. Since anxiety is one the serous impediments of learning, in the stress-free situation learners acted freely and more confidently. Through interaction learners became deeply and eagerly involved during learning and practicing.

## 6. Limitations

Regarding the limitations of the study it is safe to claim that the current study experienced some limitations which make the act of generalizing the results to be controversial. It is evident that the first and the most critical limitation was the level of the students, given that all of subjects were at intermediate level. The second issue was the number of the subjects; sixty is not a satisfactory number for generalizing of the findings to a larger population. Another issue was the gender of the subjects (all female), thus the results should not be used for male learners without caution. Another issue was that in the current study only the effect of interaction on speaking was examined, that is there are other areas that remained uncovered. The last but not least point was the time for sure, namely for measuring long-term effects of the treatment. To be honest there was one bold and serious dilemma with the group interaction; controlling the class was really problematic!

## 7. Suggestions for further research

The suggestion for further research studies would be based on the limitations of the study. Since the current investigation was examined on intermediate level learners so other studies are

required for measuring the effects on other levels. Secondly due to the fact that all of the subjects were female, therefore other studies should be performed on male learners. The next point is that other studies with more subjects are needed for enhancing the generalizability of the findings. The next point is that other research studies are essential to examine the effect of interaction on other areas. Finally longitudinal studies need to be carried out to measure the long-term effects of the interaction.

## References

- Aamer Qureshi, I. (2011). The Importance of Speaking Skills for EFL Learners. *Psycholinguistics*. 5655 (2), 1-10
- Bygate, M. (1987). *Speaking*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bygate, M. (1998). "Theoretical Perspectives on Speaking". *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*. V.18. n.1, Pp: 20-42.
- Kumaravadivelu, B. (2003). *Beyond Methods: Macrostrategies for language teaching*. Yale: Yale University Press.
- Long, M and P. Porter. (1985). Group Work, Interlanguage Talk and Second Language Acquisition. *TESOL Quarterly*, 19, 207-212
- Phan, H. P., Maebuta, J., & Dorovolomo, J. (2010). The relations between personal epistemology and learning approaches in sociocultural contexts: A theoretical conceptualization - Part II. *The International Journal of Learning*, 17(5), 465-478.
- Richards, Jack C., Platt, J., & Platt, H. (1992). *Longman dictionary of language teaching and applied linguistics*. Harlow: Longman.
- Vygotsky, L.S. (1978). *Mind in Society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press
- Walker, R., Pressick-Kilborn, K., Arnold, L. S., & Sainsbury, E. J. (2004). Investigating motivation in context: Developing sociocultural perspectives. *European Psychologist*, 9(4), 245-256.