Using a Collaborative-Learning Strategy for Developing English Conversational Skill of Post-graduate Students

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abstract

*T*he research aimed at examining the effect of a using a collaborative learning (CL) strategy on developing English conversational skill for post-graduate students. The study adopted the quasi-experimental design. The sample of the research consisted of a group of Pre-Masters TEFL students. The sample of the research has been assigned to three experimental groups. The research employed Synchronous and Asynchronous applications, namely; team viewer and facebook. Tools of the study included a conversational skill checklist, a pre-post conversational skills test and a conversational skill rating scale. Results revealed that there were statistically significant differences at 0.01 levels for the overall conversational skill and only one sub-skill (namely, using discourse markers effectively) in the favor of the post administration. Results were discussed in relation to several factors that affected the language learning process. Finally, the research provided beneficial contributions in relation to manipulating e-learning technologies in general and CL strategy in particular   with respect to language learning.
Keywords :Collaborative-Learning , E-learning,conversational skills , Speaking skills

Introduction

One of the challenges of today's educational process is shifting the emphasis from individuality effort to group work. Yet, the rapid advances in internet technologies seem to increase the choice of tools that can support collaborative interaction. Through such applications, students may have the opportunity to collaborate in live chatting and meetings. As for language learning and teaching, collaborative learners are required to be

more active participants and communicators. Such activity goes in line with the social nature of conversational skills which requires immediate responses and mutual understanding. Hence, the study attempt to develop students' English conversational skill through online collaborative learning.

Terminology and identification

There is no consensus on the definition of collaborative learning (CL). The term collaborative has been used in a wide variety of ways across different fields. CL has been used as an umbrella term for variety of educational approaches involving joint intellectual effort by students or students and teachers together. Recently, different terms have been developed interchangeably such as collaborative e-learning, computer-supported collaborative learning (CSCL), e-collaboration and online collaborative learning (, Chavez & Romero, 2012 ; Coll et.al., 2014 ; Noroozi et.al, 2012; Rasouli&Attaran , 2012) . As for the purposes of the current research, the terms Collaborative Learning, in general, and collaborative language learning (CLL) in particular were to be used. Furthermore, CLL is defined as a set of processes which promote and trigger students' interdependent interaction towards achieving a common goal resulting in learning gains. Whereas , CL strategy identifies the procedures of such processes.

Language and online CL

With regard to language learning, online environments offer new opportunities for communication and interaction. They allow learners to participate effectively in constructing speeches and holding conversations. Adopting a socio-constructivist perspective, Yang (2013:325) asserts that "language learning and acquisition are described as the construction of shared meanings through social interaction among students". Accordingly, CLL practices has been increasingly investigated (e.g., Arroyo, 2012; Dixon & Dixon, 2008; Hagely, 2014; Kohn &Worth, 2008). Despite giving the prominent attention to written language learning (e.g., Bradely et al.,2008 ; Hadjerrout, 2014; Kessler &Bikowski& Boggs, 2013; Li,

2014; Marrone et al.,2012 ; Raitman,et al.,2005; Stickler et.al, 2008; Storch ,2011), oral language development has been also tackled (Chang, 2012; Doi&Peters, 2012; Garcia-Rui, 2008 ; Meksophawannagul&HiranBurana, 2013; Mesh ,2010, Seferoğlu, 2007; Strother, 2005; Zeng &Takatsukab, 2009).

Contributions of CL in the field of language learning and acquisition have been investigated in both types of collaboration; Asynchronous and Synchronous,Tyrou and Mikros (2012:1) state

Second language acquisition research has shown that collaboration facilities language acquisition and related cognitive development.   In addition, it changes the structure of communication and social relationships developed in the classroom framework. Moreover, it allows authentic experience in learning environments, and development of students' responsibility for their own learning.

Furthermore, Mesh (2010) emphasizes that online CLL maximizes the time of participation of students. It extends the time of classroom interaction and promotes ongoing conversations. In addition, it induces peer learning, reflection and active learning.

Elements of CLL

With respect to the learning philosophical paradigm, "CL is grounded on the philosophical conceptions of cognitive and social constructivism".   Basics of CL emphasize learner's internalization of new knowledge acquired through social interactions. Based on Gruba (2004) , Laal (2013) and Doodly (2008) elements of CLL can be demonstrated in relation to the cognitive and social constructivism as follows :

Social negotiation

Social negotiation is regarded as a key part of CLL. Learners are supposed to learn something together.   They should communicate in pairs or within groups. They are obliged to rely on each other to achieve the final common target. Consequences

of a learner's failure may probably affect the whole group. Thus, the whole group dynamics reflect their interdependence and communication.

Multiple modes of representation

Language learners' collaboration could be maximized through varied technological features. Learners can participate actively in written or oral communication. Providing such modes requires implementing varied technological features, for instance, video streaming, video conference, audio streaming, instant messaging etc.

Learners' needs

Since collaboration is a goal directed activity, language learners' needs should be highly considered. Learners' awareness of the goals of their participation should be raised from the beginning. Furthermore, the benefits of achieving such goals should be well demonstrated. Each learner should know the importance of the common goal that the whole group is targeting. As the need arises in relating to the goals, students will probably communicate effectively.

Mental schemas

Being based on collaboration, language learning should take into account the similarity of mental schemas possessed by the learners. The degree of this similarity may affect their engagement within the task. It may also affect their enthusiasm to interact or negotiate. In fact, it may even have impact on their understanding or interpretations resulting in communication breakdowns.

Authenticity and individuality

Surely language learners will primarily differ in certain characteristics as individuals. Yet, such differences should be tolerated in order not to affect learners' behavior as a part of a group. For example, students typing abilities should be nearly equal. In addition, learner's access to the adopted collaborative tools should be authentic. That is, learners' use of these tools

should be a part of his life style. Hence, language learning can take part within a CL framework in relation to its constructive philosophy.

Reflect on practice

Working within groups, language learners are required to assess themselves and others. In order to achieve one target, learners have to work on each others' outcomes such reflection deepens their understanding and foster their learning. On whole, CL demands language learners to use their higher order thinking skills so as to reflect on their progress towards goal achievement.

Benefits of CLL

Benefits of CL have been gathered and categorized in varied ways.With regard to Laal &Ghodsi (2012), CL benefits can be categorized in terms of four main domains, namely; social, psychological, academic and assessment. A brief description for these domains can be demonstrated as follows:

Social benefits

CL enhances social interactional skills among learners. Students' relationships are usually characterized by mutual understanding, interdependence and support(Hwang&Kuo, 2013).

Psychological benefits

CL promotes self-esteem and develops positive attitudes towards the whole learning process including peers, teacher, subject matter and activities(Arroya, 2012).

Academic benefits

CL increases students' active participation of learners. It promotes learners' critical thinking and problem solving skills. With respect to integrating collaborative language learning and problem based tasks, Abdullah &Hoon (2011, 54)mentioned that

It stimulates communication and generates substantial discussion on a variety of topics, resulting in the use of English for academic and social interaction. It raises the students'

awareness of a real audience for the language tasks. They are working on and provide a meaningful context within which language learning, including the exploration of grammatical rules, took place.

Assessment benefits :

CL enhances the use of variety of assessment tools resulting in gathering more comprehensive data and more engagement in the evaluation process. It develops self-evaluation and peer correcting techniques .Bradelyet.al. (2010:247) advocate that some CL assessment applications may have numerous contributions in relation to language learning stating "revising co-constructed text opens up possibilities for the students to evaluate existing contributions and it also provide opportunities for them to suggest constructive changes".

However, Zorko (2009) categorized strengths of CLL according to the type of interaction, in particular asynchronous and synchronous. Yet,he noted several prospected outcomes of effective online collaboration that can be summarized as follows:

- Peer to peer interaction usually entails building teamwork on bases of an interdependent relationship, fair distribution of work, mutual understanding, self evaluation and autonomous learning.
- Student-teacher interaction includes consulting, monitory, guiding, and providing feedback and emotional support.
- Student-interaction with resources includes providing students with prompts, handouts, explanations, distribution of tasks, timing and suggestions.
- Students' interaction with interface encompasses the freedom of access to the content and the absence of technical problems.

Task design for CLL

Taking the advantage of opportunities that collaborative tools provide, it is possible to promote language learning creatively. In general, Tereseviciene&Gedviliene (2003:6) set up the following requirements to CL task design.

- The tasks are formed in such a way that the students take care not only of the fact how to execute his/her task, but also of how to execute task requirements for other group members.
- Clear individual responsibility for the work of the whole group. Every students receives feedback about his/her progress (after having assessed individually), and the group has a feedback with each member's progress (the work of the whole group is assessed).
- The students' aims encourage to extend each member's possibilities and keep good work relationships of group members;
- Management, collaboration, trust, and conflict solution are social skills, which are directly taught.
- The teacher observes and analyzes the issues that have arisen during the work process and simply as a lesson summarizes the efficiency of the group work.
- Their friendship is usually of a heterogeneous type.
- All group members share the leader's position.

However, Gruba (2001) andGoulao (2012) mention several aspects of CLL task design, among which is the following:

- The integration of authentic online resources should be professionally prepared in advance by task designers
- Self-assessment should be initiated by model responses managed by task designers.
- The task completion process should be well prepared and required.

Conversational skill and CLL

Learning collaboratively is an active way of learning. The objective of the learners is only achieved through communication and interdependence. According to Zurita and Nussbaum (2004: 290) "CL has been frequently seen as a stimulus for cognitive development, through its capacity to stimulate social interaction and learning among the members of a group". In line with this

social view of the CL process, knowing a language is regarded as a social process that underpins a human construction of knowledge(Laal et al., 2012).

In addition , Doi and Peters (2012:18) state"language is neither an essential given nor a product of individual minds; rather, it is derived from and sustained by our dynamic and ongoing social interactions". That is, language is a means of communication and a tool for building mutual understanding within a community. In particular, the purpose of a conversation is to exchange information, establish and maintain the relationship between people (Zhang, 2008: 60). Such social view of learning that CL underpinsseems to be consistent with teaching conversation which is regarded as a social activity.

The sociality of the conversation can be tackled by several features. Barraja -Rohan (2011: 481-482) highlighted the following :

- The turn-taking system, which involves how and when to take the floor, overlapping, the role of gaze and intonation, etc. The turn-taking system is also linked to the role of participants. Indeed there is a primary speaker (e.g. in story-telling the story teller takes longer turns-at-talk) and a listener (also called secondary speaker who, in the case of story-telling, makes minimal contributions), so these roles have implications on the turn-taking system;
- The sequential organization of utterances, which entails adjacency pairs. Adjacency pairs are connected to the preference organization system, such as preferred response (e.g. granting a request) or unpreferred response (e.g. refusing a request).
- Repairs, i.e. being able to know when and how to initiate and accomplish a repair. Intersubjectivity: how intersubjectivity is achieved, in other words how interactants make meaning to each other and display common understanding and knowledge;

- Paralinguistic activities, which are produced purposefully and are therefore relevant and meaningful to the participants, such as pauses, intonation, gaze, gestures, perturbations (stuttering, hesitation markers, etc.), laughter, and others.
- Context: Context is created by the participants, their utterances and actions, which reflect their relationship, e.g. how they address or greet each other.

In the light of these features, conversational sub-skills have been categorized. Based on Zang (2008) and Marshell (2012), conversational skills can be categorized as follows:

- Topic management skills (opening-shifting-closing)
- Turn taking skills (taking- interrupting-holding-passing)
- The use of adjacency pairs.
- The use of backchannel ques.
- The use of fillers, repetitions and hesitations.

The context of the problem

The present study investigated the development of English conversational skill of Pre-MastersTEFL students through the use of a CL strategy. Taking into account the researchers observation in the Admission interviews, Pre-MastersTEFL students were weak in the conversational skill. To come closer, a conversational sub-skills questionnaire was administered to a group of 10Pre-MastersTEFL students. It was designed by the researchers. It aimed at identifying the pitfalls in the participants' conversational skill. It consisted of nine items that nearly represent the common core of the conversational sub-skills. Participants had to choose from a scale of three items, namely; always, sometimes, rarely. The questionnaire's data analysis revealed that students poorly master English conversational skill as follows:

Accordingly, the problem of the research can be stated as follows: Pre-MastersTEFL students are weak in English conversational skill.

Table (1) Data Analysis of the Conversational Skills Questionnaire

Item	Percentage		
	Rarely	Some.	Alwa.
I can raise any topic easily and smoothly	**50%**	**50%**	**0%**
I can close the conversation politely	**50%**	**50%**	**0%**
I know how to interrupt others politely to ask for clarification	**50%**	**50%**	**0%**
I can easily continue my speech till I make my point clear	**66.67%**	**33.33%**	**0%**
I can mange using repetition naturally	**50%**	**33.33%**	**16.67%**
I can use discourse markers effectively	**66.67%**	**33.33%**	**0%**
I can gain time to think through using fillers (ex: emm-hhh-ahh)	**50%**	**50%**	**0%**
I use phrases like (I know – I see) to avoid communication breakdowns	**16.67%**	**66.67%**	**16.67%**
I can easily engage in a conversation	**50%**	**50%**	**0%**

Furthermore, same sample were asked to answer a computer skills questionnaire (designed by the researchers). It aimed at measuring the participants' usage and familiarity of varied social and educational online activities. It consisted of two sections. In the first section, included six web based activities which are; video conferencing, social networking social networking in English, interactive activities, ESL websites and searching for information. The degree of frequency was determined by a scale of six items, namely; seldom/ once a month/once a weak/once a day/more than once a day. The second section included two open ended questions about their feelings towards the usage of these activities in general, and educational purposes in particular. Results showed their frequent use of varied web-tools as illustrated in the following diagram:
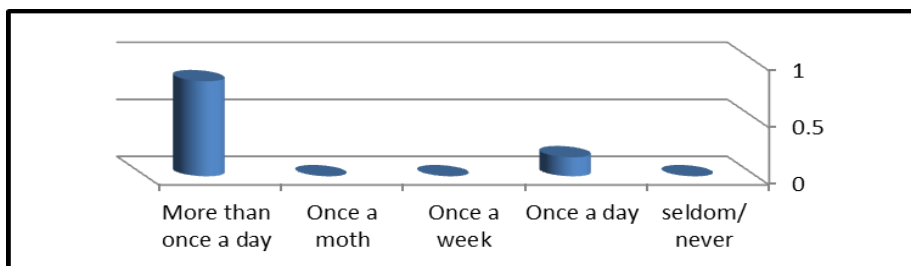
Figure (1) Results of the Computer Skills Questionnaire

Hence, the present study suggests the use of a CL strategy to develop English conversational skill of Pre-Masters TEFL students. Hence, the study was designed to answer the following overall research question: what is the effect of using CL strategy in developing English conversational skill of Pre-Masters TEFL students?

The study's hypothesis

- There is a statistically significant difference at level (0.01) between the pre and post administrations of the conversational skill test in students' overall conversational skill in favour of the post administration in terms of Wilcoxon Sign-rank .

- There is a statistically significant difference at level (0.01) between the pre and post administrations of the conversational skill test in students' conversational sub-skills in favour of the post administration in terms of Wilcoxon Sign-rank .

Method

The participants

The participants of this study were 16 Pre-MastersTEFL students at Institute of Educational studies, Cairo University. Participates' age ranged from 25 to 29 years old. Based on the participants scores on the participants scores on the TOFEL test their language mastery level was high intermediate.   The participants were assigned into three groups according to their preferences the instruments.

Conversational sub-skills checklist

A conversational sub-skills checklist was designed by the researcher(See AppendixA). It aimed at identifying the most important conversational sub-skills to the sample of the study. It was administered to three jury members of TEFL specialists (see Appendix B). It included seven skills. Five of which were chosen to be the most important, namely;

- Managing conversational turns smoothly

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- Managing topic shifts smoothly
- Using adjacency pairs appropriately
- Using back channel cues effectively
- Using discourse markers effectively.

Conversational skill test

A conversational skill test was designed by the researchers (see Appendix (C). It aimed at assessing the participants' level of mastery of the identified conversational sub-skills. It included two tasks.In the first task, participants had to answer some open ended questions for fifteen minutes. In the second task, participants had to discuss with the interviewer some topics for fifteen minutes.The validity of the test was assured by administrating the test to a panel of TEFL specialists. In order to determine the suitable time, the researchers administrated the test to a sample of 10 students. Time allotted to each task was calculated with regard to average time taken by students. Moreover, test reliability was calculated using Cronbach's Alpha (0.93) after being administrated to a sample of 10 students twice .

Conversational skill rating scale

A rating scale was designed by the researcher in order to assess participants' conversational skill. It consisted of five columns corresponding to targeted conversational sub-skills and five rows including their demonstration according to five levels of descriptions (1-5). Accordingly, each skill could be rated from 1 to 5 whereas the total score of the whole scale is 25 (See Appendix D).

Procedures

The TOEFL test was administered to the three groups of participants in February within three successive days (21-23). Each group attended one hour session during which they completed the TOEFL test. Following this session, each participant attended an individual session. In which the conversational skill test took place .Recording of these

interviews were analyzed and rated by the researcher and two other ratters with reference to the conversational skill rating scale. The inter-ratters reliability was calculated by Cronbach's Alpha (the estimated value was 0.98).   The researchers implemented the CL strategy in two stages. In the first stage, the researchers met the 16 participants in the 2nd of March. They conducted an introductory session that included; identifying the steps of the strategy, introducing the videos, introducing team viewer programs, clarifying the tasks and the duration of the implementation. It is important to note that there was no direct instruction about the conversational sub-skills. The indirect approach is used in this study as an instructional approach for teaching conversation (Dornyei&Thurrell, 1994:41).   It was thought to be more suitable to the foreign language learners whose English proficiency level is high intermediate. Second stage included the implementation of the strategy itself.

The implementation started by adding the participants to a face book group called conversational skill group. A schedule was announced to each group including fixed time of team viewer sessions. Each group was supposed to meet three times per week for a period of three month. Each session should last for nearly 2 hours. The duration of the treatment received by each group was 36 hours. Team viewer sessions were conducted in consistent with the CL strategy. Each session started by posting the (ID) number of the team viewer room on the wall of the FB group. After checking the group attendance, the sessions undergoes as follows:

a. Warm up (5 min.): Introducing the topic of the video through some simple questions about its topic. It is done by the researchers.

b. Task demonstration (10 min.) : Explaining the required tasks and assigning the roles of students. Task one requires listening to the video and preparing 5 minutes speech about one of 5 items (video –description – video content – view points – relevance – application).Task two requires each participant to present an oral report or

summarization of the whole previous task. It lasts for 30 minutes.

c. Monitoring (15 min): The researcher plays the video and check the participants attendance and attention through the instant messages (chatting). The video includes real conversations about different topic in TEFL field.

d. Discussion and reporting (50 min.) : In this stage students achieve task are and two by their own. The researchers monitor their participation and rarely interfere for help or technical purposes.

e. Consolidation and evaluation (25 min.) : The researchers presented the task sheet to the group through the whiteboard . Participants are asked to freely comment on any item.   Different issues were raised as fields of investigation in the TEFL literature. Participants are free to discuss or elaborate any vague information. Answers to any raised questions that needed investigation were posted later on via FB group. They were asked to freely comment on the CL strategy and the whole learning process.

f. The implementation of the collaborative learning strategy started on 4th March and ended on 4th, June.   The researchers administered the same conversational skill test to the participants as a pre-post within three successive days, particularly, 6th, 7th , 8th June. Same procedures of the pre-administration of the conversational skill test were employed in the post administration.

Results

The statistical techniques used in this study were ANOVA and Wiklcoxon Sign- ranks. All the data were statistically treated using statistical package for social science (SPSS).

First of all, it was essential to examine if there were any statistically significant differences between the experimental groups and within these groups in relation to the conversational skill test. Such examination took place prior to the implementation of the study. Hence, the results of the pre-

administration of the conversational skill test were subjected to statistical treatment using ANOVA tests.

Table (2) ANOVA test results of the pre-administration of the conversational skills test comparing the mean scores of the students of each group and within the groups themselves in the conversational skill.

ANOVA

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between groups	4.017	2	2.008	.120	.888
Within groups	217.733	13	16.749		
Total	221.750	15			

As shown in table (2) the estimated value is (0.88) which is not statistically significant at 0.01 level because it is less than (1). Therefore, it can be assured that the part three groups and within these groups were approximately at the same level of performance in the overall conversational skill before the implementation of the collaborative strategy.

Verifying the hypothesis : There is a statistically significant difference at level (0.01) between the pre and post administrations of the conversational skill test in students' overall conversational skill in favour of the post administration in terms of Wilcoxon Sign-rank .

To verify this hypothesis, scores of the experimental groups on the pre and post administrations of the conversational skill test were compared using wilcoxon Signed-Ranks. The results of this test proved to be statistical consistent with the hypothesis therefore, the first hypothesis is verified. Table (3) shows this statistical significanceas follows:

Table (3) Results of pre and post administrations of the conversational skill test comparing the experimental group students' scores in terms of Wilcoxon Sign-ranks

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Table (3) above shows that the estimated value was(3.542[-a]) which is statistically significant at 0.01 level. Hence, it can be safely said that there was a statistically significant difference

between the experimental groups scores on the pre and port administrations of the test in the favour of the post administration in terms of Wilcoxon Sign-ranks. The experimental groups students' significant growth in their conversational skill can be illustrated in the following figure.
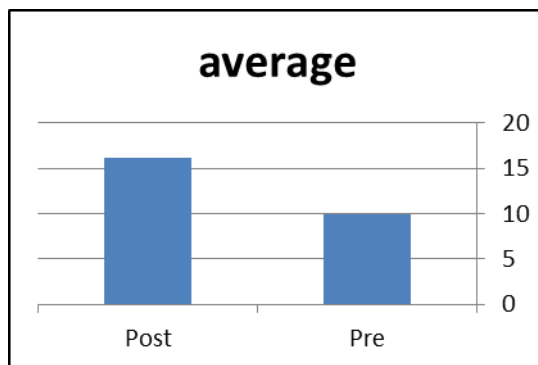
Figure (2) Comparisons of the pre and post test mean scores of the experimental group students in the overall conversational skill.

To further investigate the differences of the experimental groups scores in the pre –post administration of the conversational skills test in relation to each group, ANOVA test was used. Results showed that there were no statistically significant differences at the 0.01 level as shown in the following table

Table (3) Results of pre and post administrations of the conversational skill test comparing the experimental groups scores in terms of ANOVA test

	Sym of Square	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between groups	23.538	2	11.769	.942	.415
Within groups	162.400	13	12.492		
Total	185.938	15			

Verifying the second hypothesis: There is a statistically significant difference at level (0.01) between the pre and post administrations of the conversational skills test in students' conversational sub-skills in favour of the post administration in terms of Wilcoxon Sign-rank .

To verify this hypothesis, scores of the experimental groups on the pre and post administrations of the conversational skill

test were compared using Wilcoxon Sign-ranks in relation to the conversational sub-skills . Results revealed that there were statistically significant differences at 0.01 level for only one skill in the favour of the post administration, as shown in the following table.

Table (4) Results of pre and post administrations of the conversational skill test comparing the experimental group students' scores in relation to conversational sub-skills

No.	Conversational sub-skills	Value
1	Managing conversational turns smoothly	2.121[a] .034
2	Managing topic shits smoothly	2.754[a] .006
3	Using adjacency pairs appropriately	2.887[a] .004
4	Using back channel cues effectively	2.345[a] .019
5	Using discourse markers effectively	3.585[a] .000

The experimental group students' performance in each conversational sub-skill in both pre and post administration of the conversational skill test can be illustrated in the following figure :
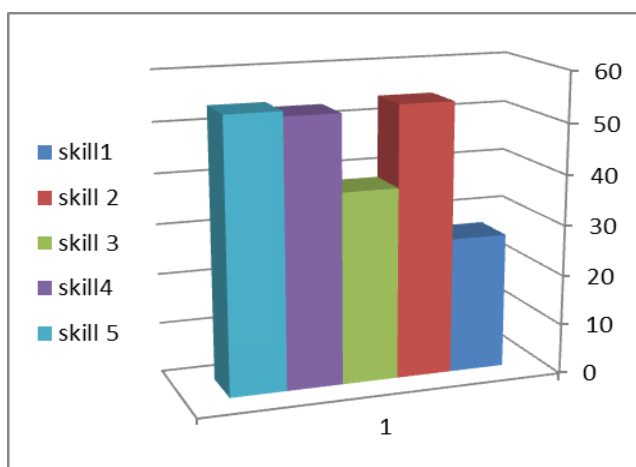
Figure (3) Comparison of pre-post mean scores of the experimental groups in each conversational skill

To sum up, the two hypothesis were supported. The experimental group students achieved triangle progress in their overall conversational skill in general and the fifth sub-skill in particular

Discussion

In the light of the previously presented statistical analysis, it can be concluded that the CL strategy had an effect on developing the experimental group students' overall conversational skill(3.542-a)and fifth sub-skill (i.e.Using discourse markers effectively) (3.585). This is proved by comparing scores of the experimental groups on the pre and post administrations of the conversational skill test using Wilcoxon Sign-ranks. This is consistent with the results of studies which proved the effective role of CL applications on enhancing students' languages skills which indicated the ineffective role of CL in developing language skills (e.g., Bradely et al.,2008 ; Chang, 2012; Garcia-Rui, 2008 ; Hadjerrout,2014;Li,2014;Marrone etal.,2012,Meksophawannagul & HiranBurana, 2013; Mesh ,2010 ; Stickler et.al, 2008, Strother, 2005).With respect to 1st ,2nd ,3rd and 4thconversational sub-skills, results did not show any significant statistical difference between scores of experimental group students in the pre-post administrations of the conversational skill test in relation to Wilicoxon Sign-rank as shown in table (4).Such results is consistent with some studies (Arnold,2009 ; Kessler & Bikowski & Boggs, 2013; Raitman,et al.,2005;Seferoğlu, 2007; Storch,2011; Wang & Chen ,2012, Zeng &Takatsukab, 2009; Zorko,2010)

In general, the students' progress in the overall conversational skill and the conversational fifth sub-skill can be ascribed to several factors. Firstly, the CL strategy was based on building team working and promoting engagement in small groups. According to Arnold et.al.(2009) and Luzan (2006) the success of such collaborative interaction depends mainly on the group members in relation to number and eagerness to participation. It is worth noting that the all group members were at the pre-Master TEFL program which means they were eager to learn and ready to participate. In addition, Chang (2012) has

assured that the variation of tasks may induce students to participate. With respect to the employed tasks, students had to actively interact, explore opinions, exchange ideas and investigate questions. Therefore , their use of oral language was real and goal driven. Accordingly, real conversations took place throughout the whole implementation resulting in such progress in the overall conversational skill.

Secondly, the environment of CL strategy was supportive to free participation. The use of varied collaborative tools (i.e face book -team viewer) provided students with wide range of choices in relation to type of interaction. Students were allowed to listen to each other, upload presentations, listen to a video and send instant texts. Such flexibility fosters students' real conversation (Bradely et.al.,2010; Mesh ,2010) .

Thirdly, students' use of discourse markers was developed as they frequently practiced giving individual speeches throughout the sessions. In addition, technical problems didn't affect their ongoing in such individual practice. That is consistent with Lozan's study (2006:1) stating " computer mediated communications help learners develop interactive competence through practice and give them the sense of having audience".

However, there are four conversational sub-skills which were not developed through using the CL strategy, namely; managing conversational turns smoothly, managing topic shits smoothly, using adjacency pairs appropriately, using back channel ques effectively. That can be mainly ascribed to three factors.

Firstly, the indirect approach for teaching conversational skill was employed in the study. Hence, no direct instructions were implemented. There weren't any demonstrations or explanations about conversational sub-skills or features of spoken language. The use of a (15 minute) video including real native conversation was the only resource about conversation skills. Students were supposed to watch and pick up how conversations go on effectively and smoothly. In fact, students

while watching the videos paid attention to the content rather than the routines of the conversation.

Such factors affected students' progress in their conversational sub-skills. In other words, students' engagement was not fruitful as they missed the real learning purpose of participation. Similar to the current study's results, Kessler &Bikowski& Boggs's study (2013) attributed the students' hindered progress in writing skills to using the collaborative tool for another learning purpose. They stated (p.91) " findings suggest that students focused more on meaning than form, that their grammatical changes were overall more accurate than inaccurate that they participated with varying frequency , and that they used the tool for simultaneous varied purposes" .

Secondly, students' level of English mastery, in general, and in the conversational skill in particular were almost equal. Hence, students' communication easily resulted in mutual understanding and shared agreements. Students established a relation based on interdependence rather than compulsory. That is, students had a very little chance to pick up conversational routines from each other. According to Storch (2011), language proficiency level is one of the main factors that may affect language learning gains.

Thirdly, there were some technical problems in relation to the collective network environments, in general, and individual network connection, in particular. Despite the flexibility of choosing the suitable time, network connections constituted a huge challenge for most of students. Several tools were deployed to overcome this obstacle such as (using USB, increasing download rate of wireless connections). However, communication hanging on or break downs took place. It is worth noting that, any technical problem a member of the group faces affects the whole CL process since it was build on bases of interdependence. That is students' conversations were subjected to regular interruptions,for example:

- A students' voice became too slow (weak connection)

- Echoes of students' voice appeared regularly (weak connection)
- Videos pause regularly while playing (weak connection)
- Video took too long time to load before playing (weak connection)
- Either the sound or screen of the video stop working suddenly
- Video conferencing stopped working immediately

Such problems affected the quality of group discussion. Usually, students suffered from waiting for feedback or clarification. As a result, the process of group discussion didn't lead to a satisfying amount of vivid ongoing conversations. Such hindering factors had been highlighted also by different studies which suggested the use of CL applications to develop oral language skills such as Seferoglu (2007), Wang & Chen (2012) and Zeng &Takatsukab (2009) who stated (p.442) " most importantly , the unstable network and busy schedule might have affected learner's effective participation"

Conclusion and pedagogical implications

The study aimed at developing conversational skill for Pre-Master TEFL program at Institute of Educational Studies, Cairo University. For the purpose of the study, the use of the CL strategy had been investigated for a period of three months. The results reported here suggested that students' overall conversational skill had been developed with respect to Wilicoxon Sign-rank. Several factors had contributed to the students'progress, particularly; variety of tasks, ongoing interaction and size of group. However, other factors hindered their progress in relation to some conversational sub-skills, such as language proficiency and internet connection problems. In order to maximize the benefits of CLL, it is worth considering the following aspects to support a more suitable e-learning environment to language development, in general, and conversational skill in particular:

- Incorporating varied and challenging collaborative tasks.
- Designing tasks in terms of students' linguistic needs and language proficiency.
- Introducing the employed CL strategies in details.
- Assigning students into group according to their proficiency level on bases of heterogeneity.
- Providing students with technical facilities and support.
- Employing variety of collaborative tools so as to create rich e-learning environment.
- Adding facilities of face to face interactions and live meetings.
- Enabling audio and video recordings for formative evaluation.

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