The Impact of Collaborative Learning on Speaking Anxiety Among Foreign Language Learners in Online and Face-to-Face Environments

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ABSTRACT

While speaking anxiety is one of the most problematic aspects observed in English as a foreign language (EFL) context, a limited number of studies focused on the impact of collaborative learning on speaking anxiety in different learning environments. This study investigates the effects of collaborative tasks on foreign language learners' speaking anxiety in face-to-face and online learning contexts. In this experimental study, the data were collected from 34 foreign language students with a questionnaire consisting of a background part and a scale for measuring speaking anxiety. Even though the results revealed changes in speaking anxiety levels after the collaborative instruction in the face-to-face environments, no differences were found between face-to-face and online environments in terms of the impact of collaborative instruction on learners' speaking anxiety.

KEYWORDS

Collaborative Learning, English as a Foreign Language, Face-to-Face Environments, Online Environments, Speaking Anxiety

INTRODUCTION

Speaking is considered one of the most important language skills. The main reason why this skill is so important is that it is the most efficient method to convey meaning, and thus, it is considered the primary means of communication (Sudarmo, 2021). However, learning speaking skills can be much more complicated since it consists of various components such as phonetic, phonologic, lexical, and pragmatic knowledge. A great speaker not only knows what to speak and when to speak, but he is also aware of the delivery of the structures and how they are socially appropriate. Since speaking is a complex skill that requires the ability to produce the language within a context, mastery of it is crucial in language learning. Therefore, most language learners measure their competency through speaking abilities and performance (Burns & Goh, 2012). In other words, speaking well is believed

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to be a concrete sign of language learning. Another reason is that learners can build an understanding of the foreign culture and language through interaction since the speech includes the message and some cultural and contextual clues based on the way the speech is delivered. Finally, even though most language teachers are aware of the importance of speaking and try to follow a communicative approach in language teaching, students usually master the reading and listening skills before speaking which is a concrete sign of how challenging it is to teach and acquire.

On the other hand, foreign language learners are affected by both cognitive and affective factors when it comes to speaking. One of the most problematic affective factors is believed to be speaking anxiety since it is also the most frequently observed in an EFL classroom. Anxiety is mostly seen in language classrooms because learners are expected to be cognitively active and ready to produce an output. These complex mental procedures challenge learners to become more competent speakers and trigger feelings like fear and panic (Horwitz et al., 1986). Along with learners' cognitive performance, the capacity to comprehend and learn the language will also decrease as this feeling mostly acts as a barrier leading learners to failure (Wörde, 2003). However, even though speaking anxiety is a common research topic that attracts researchers, there is still no precise way to solve this problem that is frequently encountered in EFL classrooms.

Interaction that may influence speaking anxiety is also one of the core concepts in language teaching. However, it is a rather complex concept involving various processes such as cognitive, social, and psycholinguistic. Learners are the ones that need to develop these skills and decode the hidden messages to give a relevant reaction and keep the conversation going. This is why many scholars state that learning a language is only possible if there is meaningful and authentic interaction between learners (Vygotsky, 1978). Especially in face-to-face classroom environments where there is foreign language input abundance, teachers and students can create more opportunities for meaningful interaction and motivate learners to communicate more (Yu, 2009). Therefore, classroom interaction is more than just practicing a foreign language; it affects the whole language learning process. As an alternative to face-to-face interaction, online interaction increases student participation since it provides a non-threatening and entertaining environment for language learning (Seneff et al., 2004). Effective online interaction decreases teacher authority, and students are encouraged to contribute more. It is even possible to create interactive environments without the teacher's presence. As a result, they have a greater chance to use the functions of the language within different contexts and learn more about the real usages of that language and may have facilitative effects on speaking anxiety. In this perspective, in unnatural learning contexts like traditional classroom environments, learners' anxiety levels may increase due to several reasons such as the dominance of the teacher, fear of negative evaluation, and fear of speaking in front of an audience. In other words, oral communication skills could be harder to develop especially in traditional classroom environments where learners have restricted opportunities to communicate with their peers and teacher. Therefore, developing learning contexts to support language learning and reduce anxiety is crucial. By creating real-life situations and using authentic materials, learners become less obliged to learn the language and thus more open to receiving input (Wei & Elias, 2011). Within this scope, collaborative learning allows students to select specific goals, provide options, value learners' interests, and scaffold learners in the assessment process. Integrating collaborative activities into the learning procedure encourages learners to participate more in group discussions by letting them express their points of view freely, which alleviates their anxiety (Osman et al., 2010) since collaboration creates a successful learning atmosphere making students feel less worried about their own performance. Dramatically enough, how collaborative learning via face-to-face and online activities affects speaking anxiety is not clarified in the related literature, as can be seen below. However, a theoretical framework is drawn before presenting a research synthesis on the issue.

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