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On Implementation of Participatory Approach: Yes or NO?

Neda Fatehi Rad[1], Rahman Sahragard[2*]

1. Department of English Language, Qeshm Branch, Islamic Azad University, Qeshm, Iran.
2. Department of English Language, Shiraz Branch, Islamic Azad University, Shiraz, Iran.

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Abstract

The structure of socio-culture encouraged the following study to investigate the ways participation in collaborative learning tasks can have an effect on the overall English proficiency of EFL students' academic achievement. The learners' engagement in learning and collaboration with others for achieving their goals often happen in participatory approach to second language teaching and learning (Cobb, 1994; Greeno, 1998). In a same way, collaborative learning plays a good role in increasing learners' interdependence (Bruffee, 1999), responsibility (Totten, Sills, Digby, & Russ, 1991), interpersonal skills (Rymes, 1997), and cognitive and critical thinking skills (Johnson & Johnson, 1986). Therefore, both the control and study group were randomly selected from 60 Iranian EFL learners of two intact classes. The first group which was the control group was exposed to regular teaching process through the conventional book-based method. While, in experimental group activities such as role play, problem solving, group work and collaborative tasks in the classroom instruction were mostly used. Accordingly, scores on the IELTS posttest in both groups improved but, the statistics of their overall performance showed that there is no significant difference. However, separate skills on the IELTS exam needed some analyses the result of which contended that the scores of experimental group on the speaking skill was significantly higher. Clearly, the scores on the vocabulary and grammar posttest in experimental group were significantly higher. In conclusion, higher mean scores indicate that EFL learners' vocabulary and grammar learning will be facilitated through both participatory approach and collaborative activities. In fact, the more interactions among learners in classroom activities are used, improvement of speaking skills can be encouraged. As the results of the students' and teachers' interview revealed, both students and teachers' attitudes towards participatory approach were positive and were also highly inclined to receive such tasks and activities in future.

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* Corresponding Author e-mail: rahman.sahragard@gmail.com

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1. Introduction

Unsurprisingly, students enjoy group works more; but of course, there are a few number of individuals who are not open to such commitment. Clearly collaborative learning approach has emerged in order to encourage more group-works for the task of completion and problem solving. As it is defined by Gerlach, "Collaborative learning means that learning is a naturally social act in which the participants talk among themselves (Gerlach, 1994)". It has been proven that collaborative learning raises the level of student interdependence (Bruffee, 1999), responsibility (Totten, Sills, Digby, & Russ, 1991), interpersonal skills (Rymes, 1997), and cognitive and critical thinking skills (Johnson & Johnson, 1986). It has been proven that communicative interaction in second language classrooms is a sever demand in some studies on second language acquisition (Doughty & Williams, 1998; Ellis, 2003; Williams, 2005).

The pedagogical tasks that encourage negotiation of meaning could be considered as options to do so (Ellis, 2003; Yuan & Ellis, 2003). Social interaction and collaboration have been considered as important factors in the learning of Sociocultural principles. Likewise, Vygotsky (1986) has also insisted that learning in isolation will not encourage individual cognitive development, which has to be in a social enterprise; additionally, Vygotsky's notion (1978) of ZPD (zone of proximal development) focuses on the differences in the levels between the actual developmental level in order to perform independently, and the level of potential development for problem solving under adult guidance which are based on his sociocultural theory. Additionally, Chaiklins' definition clearly indicated that the range of the tasks which were performed, in fact, is actually the definition of ZPD (Chaiklin, 2003).

In much the same way, the work of Piaget and Vygotsky has inspired the researches on collaborative and participatory approach (Dillenbourg et al., 1996). In fact, socio-constructivists were inspired by Piaget's system of developmental stages. In other words, Piaget emphasized that children's developmental stages are parallel to their cognitive progress. Furthermore, socio-constructivism partially believes the ideas related to cognitive conflict, which refers dichotomies between current, new information, and experiences. As with the participatory approach, the following study aims to examine its probable effects on academic achievement of EFL learners who study in the Azad University of Kerman. Apart from all the models and studies in language learning classrooms which are carried out by collaborative learning, there has been still demand for researches which focus on the effects of the participatory approach on academic achievement of EFL students. "Traditional methods of teaching have failed to produce graduates with the kinds of skills they need to be effective engineers e.g., working in teams; applying scientific and engineering theory and principles; solving unstructured, practical problems, and communicating with others" (Cabrera, Colbeck, Terenzini, 2001: 2). Not having done so might easily put forth the difficulties. Unsurprisingly, learners' engagement which is a productive environment for collaboration and teamwork, and applying problem-solving activities can definitely be difficult feats in teaching a second language (Kalyuga, Mantai, Marrone, 2012).

By considering previous researches and studies, the following research questions were posed: 1. Will the employment of Participatory Approach in EFL classes be effective in terms of improving intermediate EFL learners' academic achievements? 2. Are all four skills of language positively influenced through the implementation of Participatory Approach? 3. Are other language components positively influenced through the implementation of Participatory Approach? 4. What are the effects of applying Participatory Approach on learning English in intermediate level from the learners' perspective?

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2. literature Review

Participatory approach, which has been described as "structuring positive interdependence", organizes classroom activities into academic and social learning experiences. It is, however, different from group work. What is necessary here is students' group work to complete tasks collectively toward academic goals. What's more, cooperation gives students a chance to benefit from one another's resources and skills (asking one another for information, evaluating one another's ideas, monitoring one another's work, etc.); and teacher will become a facilitator and need not be spoon feeding them. Hence, individual success depends on the group success. Considering Ross and Smyth (1995) study, claimed successful cooperative learning tasks to behighly intellectually demanding, creative, open-ended, and involve higher order thinking tasks. Cooperative learning theory practiced today has undergone changes and been influenced by philosophers and psychologists in the 1930s and 40's such as John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, and Morton Deutsh (Sharan, 2010).

Central to Dewey's perspective, it was vital that students' growth of knowledge and social skills be used outside the classroom, and in the democratic society. Therefore, it emphasized that students have to be active recipients of knowledge by discussing information andanswers in groups, engaging in the learning process together rather than being passive receivers of information (e.g., teacher talking, students listening). Building a good rapport among group members to achieve learning goals successfully paved the way for Lewin's contribution to cooperative learning. "Positive social interdependence" was also Deutsh'sperspective toward cooperative learning; in other words, the student is responsible for contributing to group knowledge (Sharan, 2010).Since then, an active contribution toward participatory approach theory has been made by David and Roger Johnson. Later on in 1975, it was perceived that rapport, better communication, a good sense of support, along with a growth in thinking strategies throughout the group (Johnson and Johnson, 1975). As regard with advocates of participatory approach, students' interest in learning increases when students share, debate and discuss ideas actively in their groups. Hence, their critical thinking skills grow through engaging in discussion and taking responsibility for their learning (Totten, Sills, Digby& Russ, 1991). Most studies have shown that students who work in small groups are more willing to take much of the delivered material. They also remember the material longer and seem to be more content with their classes (Beckman, 1990; Chickering & Gamson, 1991; Goodsell, et al, 1992).

According to Slavin (1989) functionality and success of an approach depends on both personal and group goals. Clearly enough, one of the pioneers of sociocultural approaches to learning and development is L. S. Vygotsky and his collaborators in Russia in the nineteen-twenties and thirties. Simply enough, they made this concept clear that most of human activities take place in cultural contexts, are enhanced by language system, then it can be best understood when investigated in their historical development (Lantolf, 2000). According to the basis of socio-cultural theory to understanding the development of communication, Adamson and Chance (1998, as cited in Lantolf and Thorne, 2005) put forth that there are two vitally important aspects to a Vygotskian approach to social interactions. Introduction of ZPD (zone of proximal development) as new approach byVygotsky (1986) was central to the principle that learning must be parallel to the child's developmental stage. To make it clear, the relationship between development and learning, actual and potential level of development must be identified. The actual developmental level refers to the activities or achievements that can be done by child itself alone or independently; on the other hand, potential levels of development refers to the activities which can be done under guidance and supervision of a second party. ZPD, which highlights the fact that learning is a largely socially-mediated activity, and real learning takes place in students' zone of proximal development (Balakrishnan& Narvaez, 2016) was conceptualized by Vygotskyto show how students come to know. Vygotsky also believed that in ZPD are enough support, guidance and assistance thatthey can achieve the task. The ZPD has been regularly referred to as the term 'scaffolding' introduced firstly by Wood et al (1976). That is, students' achievement can be done solo just

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after it was achieved under supervision of scaffolding (McLeod, 2010). Learner's discovery grows as they cooperate socially. The Zone of Proximal Development is the climax in which this learning occurs (Walqui, 2003). There is also another definition of ZPD by Murray and Arroyo (2002) which illustrated it as something between confusion and boredom.

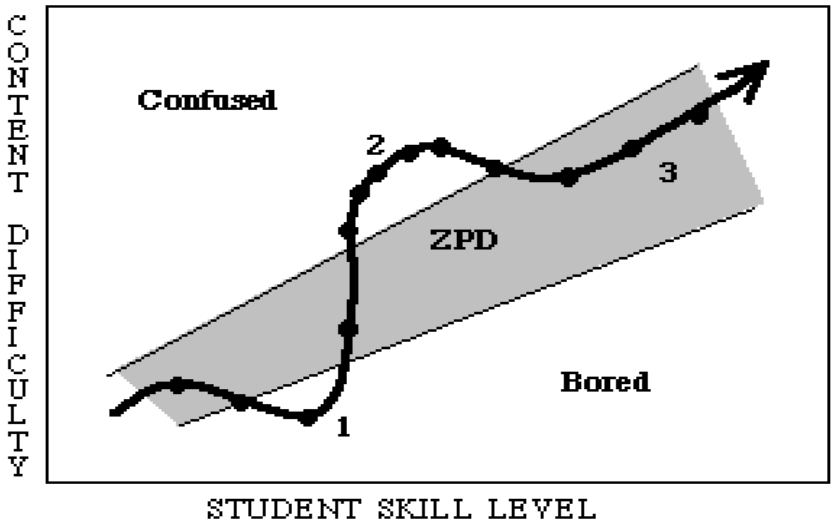

Figure 1. ZPD illustration (Murray & Arroyo, 2002: 2)

Another one was introduced by Christmas et al. (2013). The yellow color is the zone of achieved development.

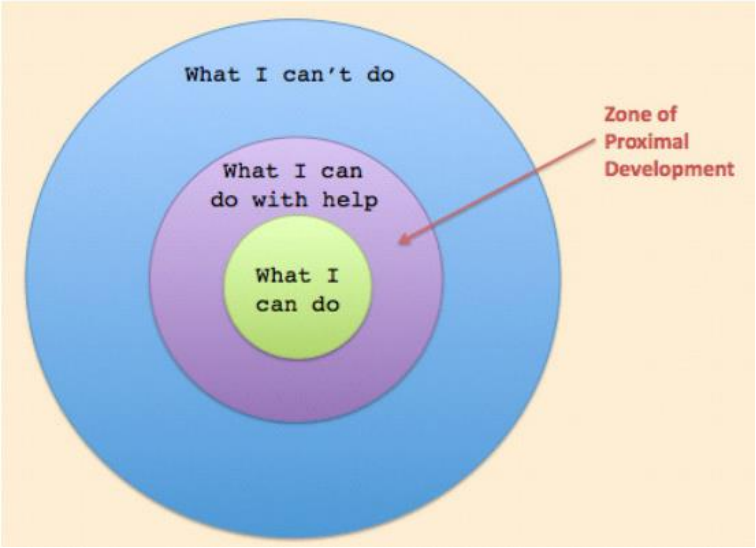

Figure 2. A model of the ZPD (Christmas et al, 2013: 372)

The purple area shows learning with the assistance. The blue color is referred to as the area where the child is not able to learn even in case of receiving assistance. Another illustration of the ZPD appeared in the work of Linnell and Fluck (2001) who put the counting skills of preschool children under investigation. Children at this age have counting difficulty; however, practice with a more experienced partner would of course lead to a better performance gradually. Harris and Butterworth (2012) stated that "the distance between what a child can achieve unaided in a particular situation – such as completing a puzzle or playing with toys – and what can be achieved with the help of adults, older children or even with children of similar age is called ZPD (Harris & Butterworth, 2012: 28).

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3. Methodology

60 Iranian EFL university students at English-Persian translation major participated in the present study from both genders with no age limits. Before administering treatment, a proficiency test was performed based on TOEFL proficiency test from ETS administrated in 2004. This multiple-choice test comprised of 50 listening comprehension, 40 grammarand writing, and 50 reading comprehension tasks. As the main purpose of the study is to investigate the effects of participatory approach on the academic achievement of Iranian EFL learners in terms of their language proficiency test, a standard IELTS Test has been used as the instrument for pre-test and post-test to collect data on their performances. A standard IELTS Test is comprised of four sections that contain 40 questions on listening, 40 questions on reading, a three-part interview section and two tasks on writing. Since the test comprises of four separate sections, it has been used to examine the participants' improvement with regard to the four main language skills.

In the first step, before the treatment sessions began, all participants took part in the paper-based TOEFL proficiency test. The test was used to check the homogeneity of the group in terms of their entry proficiency level. Then, in the experimental phase of the study, the participants completed the four sections of the IELTS test. The test was used as the pre-test to examine their entry-level proficiency in English. Before they completed the test booklet, however, the researcher gave them an orientation to the test as to how to complete the different sections on it. The two classes were then randomly selected as the control group and the experimental group. For the next fourteen sessions, the researcher in the control group class followed his regular teaching practice through the conventional method of conducting an English class. In the experimental group class, however, the researcher adopted the participatory approach for the next fourteen sessions until the end of the semester. First, she gave them a thorough introduction to the basic principles of the approach and tried to make them familiar with different types of activities they were supposed to have in the following sessions.

For the following fourteen sessions, breaking away from the traditional book-centered method of teaching language skills, the researcher applied various participator approach-based techniques, activities, role play, problem solving activities, group work and collaborative tasks in the classroom instruction. In the next step, the students in the control and experimental group took part in the IELTS post-test in order for the researcher to examine their comparative achievement at the end of the Project. Finally, the students were asked to respond to an already validated questionnaire having Likert Scale. Also, the faculty members of the English Department were interviewed to check their attitudes toward participatory Approach. With regard to the data collected during the experimental phase of the study, the raw scores obtained from the proficiency test, the pre-test and post-test were submitted to statistical analyses. To compare the performances of the participants on the post-tests, the mean scores of the participants after each treatment were compared using several paired sample t-tests to find out if there were any statistically significant differences between the subjects' performances after the treatment. As regards to the descriptive data collected through the qualitative research procedure including results of the interview with the students, the qualitative analysis proceeded coding the information into categories or levels looking for similarities and differences among data. Similarly, in this study, qualitative data was gathered by interviews and was compiled and coded in order to find out answers to the research questions. This method of triangulation, in fact, is expected to further confirm the results achieved through the experimental phase of the study. Thus, paired sample t-tests were run to analyze the quantitative data including pre-test and post-test results, and coding data was applied to analyze the qualitative data gathered through interview.

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4. Finding

Table1. Results of Pearson correlation test for the speaking scores

		First administration	Second administration
First administration	Pearson Correlation	1	.764
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.016
	N	15	15
Second administration	Pearson Correlation	.764	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.016	
	N	15	15

Based on these statistics, it is appropriate to conclude that the rater's scores enjoyed intra-rater reliability. The same procedure was adopted for the writing scores: the correlation between the two administrations is ($r=.71$, $p=.02$) < 0.5. Considering the results, the observed correlation coefficient was significant since the observed p valued was below 0.05 and reliable. Based on these statistics, it is appropriate to conclude that the rater's writing scores enjoyed intra-rater reliability.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for IELTS pretest scores

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
IELTS Pretest	Experimental	19	3.8947	.20943	.04805
	Control	20	3.8000	.37697	.08429

The results show that the control group's mean score is slightly lower than that of the participatory group and the standard deviation statistic shows that the control group is a little more heterogeneous than the participatory group.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics for IELTS posttest scores

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
IELTS Posttest	Experimental	19	4.2632	.53667	.12312
	Control	20	4.0250	.63815	.14269

The results show that the control group's mean score is lower than the one of the participatory group and the standard deviation statistic shows that the control group is more heterogeneous than the participatory group. In order to further analyze the results inferentially, the normality of the distribution had to be tested.

Table 4. Normality test for pretest scores

	Group	Kolmogorov-Smirnov[a]			Shapiro-Wilk		
		Statistic	Df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
IELTS Pretest	Experimental	.482	19	.000	.507	19	.000
	Control	.452	20	.000	.569	20	.000
IELTS Posttest	Experimental	.372	19	.000	.740	19	.000
	Control	.266	20	.001	.862	20	.009

To test the normality of the IELTS academic scores for experimental and control groups, for both sets of scores the Kolmogrov-Smirnov Test of Normality was conducted. As Table 4 suggests, the null hypothesis, which assumes the homogeneity of variance and normal distribution of the sample, could be rejected for the participatory group's pretest scores (ZK-S =.48, p-value=.00), and posttest scores (ZK-S =.37, p-value=.00). Moreover, the null hypothesis for the normality of the scores can be rejected for control group pretest (ZK-S =.45, p-value=.00) and posttest scores (ZK-S =.26, p-value=.00). Therefore, non-parametric test had to be used to test the hypotheses.

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Table 5. Mann-Whitney test for comparing pre- and post-test scores of the experimental and control groups

	IELTS Pretest	IELTS Posttest
Mann-Whitney U	176.500	154.000
Wilcoxon W	386.500	364.000
Z	-.516	-1.113
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.606	.266
Exact Sig. [2*(1-tailed Sig.)]	.708[a]	.322[a]

It can be understood that the difference between the IELTS posttest mean scores (U= 154.00, p= .26) was not statistically significant since the obtained p value was less than 0.05. Therefore, the difference seen in table 3 is negligible. In other words, it can be concluded that the first hypothesis of the study was rejected regarding the fact that the participatory approach was not more effective than the conventional approach adopted in the control group in terms of improving the learners' scores on the IELTS test. The first hypothesis was accepted. In order to answer the second research question, the second null hypothesis was formulated: All four skills of language are not positively influenced through the implementation of Participatory Approach. To test the hypothesis, the pretest and posttest scores collected from the participatory group and the control groups were compared with regard to each language skill separately.

Table 6. Descriptive statistics of the pretest scores for each language skill

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Reading Pretest	Experimental	19	3.8684	.36675	.08414
	Control	20	3.8750	.35818	.08009
Speaking Pretest	Experimental	19	3.4737	.31063	.07126
	Control	20	3.4500	.64685	.14464
Writing Pretest	Experimental	19	3.3947	.48816	.11199
	Control	20	3.3000	.47016	.10513
Listening Pretest	Experimental	19	4.1316	.43596	.10002
	Control	20	3.8750	.60426	.13512

The mean score and standard deviation of participatory group was pretty identical to that of the control group in terms of reading, speaking and writing. The only significant difference was observed in in terms of listening where the participatory group's mean score and SD were 4.13 and 0.43, respectively. On the other side, the control group achieved 3.87 and 0.60 as its mean score and SD, respectively.

Table 7. Descriptive statistics for the language skills scores on the posttest

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Reading Posttest	Experimental	19	4.0526	.59849	.13730
	Control	20	4.0250	.54952	.12288
Speaking Posttest	Experimental	19	4.1053	.63637	.14599
	Control	20	3.6635	.61375	.14464
Writing Posttest	Experimental	19	3.5526	.59849	.13730
	Control	20	3.5000	.51299	.11471
Listening Posttest	Experimental	19	4.5526	.62126	.14253
	Control	20	4.1750	.81556	.18236

The mean score for the participatory group's reading, speaking, writing and listening tests were 4.05, 4.10, 3.55, and 4.55, respectively. This indicated that the control group's reading and writing mean scores were very similar to those of the participatory group. The speaking and listening results of control group were less than those of the opposite group.

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Table 8. Comparison of language components pre- and post-test scores for the experimental and control groups

	Reading		Speaking		Writing		Listening	
	Pretest	posttest	Pretest	posttest	Pretest	posttest	Pretest	posttest
Mann-Whitney U	188.500	184.000	180.000	91.500	170.000	185.000	144.000	142.000
Wilcoxon W	378.500	394.000	390.000	301.500	380.000	395.000	354.000	352.000
Z	-.055	-.187	-.298	-2.862	-.672	-.158	-1.511	-1.387
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.956	.852	.766	.004	.502	.874	.131	.165
Exact Sig. [2*(1-tailed Sig.)]	.967[a]	.879[a]	.792[a]	.005[a]	.588[a]	.901[a]	.204[a]	.184[a]

Table shows that the difference between the reading, speaking writing, and listening pretest mean scores were not statistically significant since the obtained p value is more than 0.05. Further, this table does not indicate any significant difference in terms of reading, writing and listening in post-test scores. The only considerable difference was observed in speaking scores in that p value is less than 0.05. Therefore, it can be argued that the participatory approach was not more effective than the conventional approach adopted in the control group in terms of improving the learners' scores on the reading, writing and listening tests, whereas the participatory approach could significantly improve the learners' speaking ability on the posttest. In addition, further analysis showed that this approach was similar to the conventional approach in improving the learner's ability. Accordingly, the second hypothesis is accepted for reading, writing and listening areas (not for speaking).

Table 9. Descriptive statistics of the vocabulary and grammar pretest and posttest

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Language Pretest	Experimental	19	15.2632	1.55785	.35740
	Control	20	14.5000	1.67017	.37346
Language Posttest	Experimental	19	17.6316	1.83214	.42032
	Control	20	16.1000	1.61897	.36201

The results of pretest indicated that the control group's mean score was slightly lower than that of the participatory group and the standard deviation statistic shows that the control group was a little more heterogeneous than the participatory group. According to the results obtained from posttest, the same proportion was repeated, that is, lower mean score and higher heterogeneousness of the control group in comparison to those of the participatory group.

Table 10. Paired Samples Test for the comparison of the vocabulary and grammar pretest and posttest for the experimental and control groups

		Paired Differences							
					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Lower	Upper	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pair 1	Language Posttest for Experimental Group - Language Posttest for Control Group	1.42105	2.21900	.50907	.35153	2.49058	2.791	18	.012
Pair 2	Language Pretest for Experimental Group - Language Pretest for Control Group	.73684	2.51312	.57655	-.47444	1.94813	1.278	18	.217

The results revealed that the participatory approach made a significant progress (t= 2.79, p= .01) in their grammar and vocabulary knowledge based scores of test developed for the textbook they have covered in their course. The grammar and vocabulary knowledge of the control group, however, did not significantly

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improve considering the scores of the language posttest (t= 1.27, p= .21). Therefore, the third hypothesis was rejected. In other words, it has been proved that the participatory approach had a positive effect on the participant's improvement in both vocabulary and grammar knowledge. Regarding the fourth question and hypothesis in terms of the learners' perspective on the implementation of the participatory approach, the qualitative data from the interview were analyzed. This interview consisted of six items: 1) was the teacher's feedback during group activities perceivable during the course? 2) To what extent were your errors corrected? 3) In the future classes what type of instruction do you prefer to receive? 4) In the future classes what type of feedback do you prefer to receive? 5) Which areas do you prefer to be more emphasized in such classes? And 6) did you achieve your expectations in this course?

The findings of the interview revealed that the majority of the participants were satisfied with the variety of the group activities, their interactions with the teacher and their classmates and particularly, the feedback they received during classroom interactions. The ideas are, on the one hand, in line with principles of Swain's (1995) Output Hypothesis, as she states that one of the effects of the output is that it helps learners understand the gap between what they say and what they need to say as they learn from the native speaker, their teacher or their peers. The findings are, on the other hand, consistent with the principles of Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, holding that learners learn from the other better knowers, be it a native speaker, the teacher, or other learners in group activities. As it has been shown above, the findings in this study seem to suggest that the implementation of the participatory approach and collaborative activities did prove a statistically significant effect on the performance of the experimental group on the IELTS academic test as compared with the performances of the control group. The results are in line with results of a number of previously conducted research in the related literature (Kuiken & Vedder, 2002; Nassaji & Tian, 2010; Swain & Lapkin, 2001; Tocalli-Beller, 2003).

A number of reasons may account for this lack of improvement in the academic achievement of EFL learners. Some of the previous studies (Storch, 1997, 2005; Kuiken&Vedder, 2002) also suggested that although collaboration may lead to better task performance, it may not necessarily lead to subsequent learning of the target forms. Thus, the findings do not support the presumed advantage of collaborative pair work over individual work or the idea that collaborative tasks are necessarily more effective than individual tasks. Drawing on some of the previous studies that came to similar results (Kuiken & Vedder, 2002; Nassaji& Tian, 2010; Swain & Lapkin, 2001; Tocalli-Beller, 2003), there might be several reasons for such findings. One reason might be related to the nature of the interaction that took place during group work. Another reason might have been the unfamiliar nature of the approach and collaborative activities. Since most of the activities were mostly new to the learners, it might have been difficult for the learners to provide each other with constructive scaffolding and peer feedback during the tasks, and when they did so, it positively influenced their immediate task completion, but did not help improving their achievement on the proficiency test. Another reason could be related to the nature of the IELTS academic test, with which the participants were not much familiar, though they were given some orientation as how to complete the test. Another reason could be related to the learners' limited skills of how to collaborate effectively with peers. These factors may all interfere with the effectiveness of collaborative group work and hence should be considered when designing, researching, and using group activities in L2 learning. All these suggest that it is not the collaborative work (or the individual work) itself, but how and under what conditions it is conducted that determines its beneficial effects for language learning. The results in the present research, however, have pointed to the fact that the participatory approach and collaborative activities have had a positive effect on improving the language achievement of the participants as measured by vocabulary and grammar tests. The experimental group also had some improvement in terms of their performances on the IELTS academic posttests as compared with their performances on the pretest. Furthermore, as it was shown above, results of the analysis on separate language skills showed that the participatory group had a statistically significant

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improvement on the IELTS posttest as compared with the control group. The findings seem to suggest that the participatory approach can better influence oral skills in comparison with written skills.

5. Discussion

The present study set out to investigate the relative effectiveness of employing participatory approach and collaborative activities on the academic achievement of Iranian EFL learners. Results revealed that although the students in both group improved their scores on the IELTS posttest, there was no statistically significant difference between the experimental group's overall performance and that of the control group on the posttest. Results of the analyses conducted on separate skills on the IELTS exam, however, revealed that the experimental group had higher scores on the speaking skill in comparison of the scores of the control group. Also, the experimental group achieved higher scores on the vocabulary and grammar posttest in comparison with control group. These higher mean scores, as a result, suggests that the participatory approach and collaborative activities have the potentials to help learners develop a better learning of English vocabulary and grammar. Moreover, they can encourage more interactions among learners in classroom activities and thus, help them improve their speaking skills.

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