

Employing Partnership Approach in Streamed Language Classrooms to Improve Speaking Skill of Iranian Undergraduate EFL Learners

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Abstract

Introducing effective approaches and providing equal opportunities for all language learners at any level of language knowledge to learn successfully seems to be an asset. In this study, the role of employing Partnership Approach (PA) to teach speaking to undergraduate EFL students through Streaming/Homogeneous-Grouping of the learners in Mixed-Ability classrooms was examined. A quasi-experimental research method was employed and 72 Iranian male and female undergraduate students majoring in TEFL whose ages ranged from 19-24 participated in the study. The study comprised three experimental and three control groups in high, low, and mixed language-ability levels based on the results of an Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT) so that there were 12 students in each group. The findings indicated that among the streamed experimental groups, low-ability students did not significantly develop their speaking ability. On the contrary, low-ability students benefited from the mixed-ability teaching more than the other students both in the control and the experimental groups. Mixed-ability and high-ability students in the experimental group significantly outperformed their counterparts in the control group. Low-ability students in the control group outperformed their counterparts in the experimental group. This study has the potential to develop new insights and ideas which can be adapted by both EFL teachers and students in different educational settings. The processes and outcomes of the study can be adapted for use in other disciplines to examine the effect of ability grouping and partnership on the individuals' overall success.

Keywords: Engagement, Mixed-Ability Language Classrooms, Partnership Approach, Streamed Language Classrooms

1. Introduction

One of the most controversial issues in education, particularly for undergraduate students at the university level has long been teaching and learning a foreign language. Hence, in order to make language learning and teaching more interesting and promote EFL learners' achievements, language teachers and researchers have been encouraged to investigate new approaches, teaching methods, and educational techniques. As an innovative approach to engaging students in enhancing teaching and learning, Partnership Approach (PA) gives the learners opportunities to experience new ways of thinking, working together, and learning. Students learn to take responsibility for their learning,

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improve ethic, and develop a more positive attitude towards learning (Healy, Flint, & Harrington, 2014).

Heterogeneity is an inevitable issue that Iranian English teachers encounter in most of their classrooms. They wonder how to cater to the different ability levels of their students regarding their English proficiency levels. In this relation, the students' prior English backgrounds and experiences, beginning to learn English at different ages, unequal motivation to learn among EFL learners, different family backgrounds, the variety of English teaching programs at schools, and some flaws in the university entrance exams are among the factors which contribute to the issue. This is why, even in the same learning condition, learners do not achieve the same level of language proficiency (Zafar & Meenakshi, 2012).

In mixed-ability classes, it is difficult for the teacher to keep the attention of all the students at the same time. Some students participate in classroom activities while some others are totally indifferent. Weak students are usually left behind, feel disappointed, and prefer to stay away. More knowledgeable students, on the other hand, lose motivation and get bored of being exposed to easy materials or waiting for the weak students to catch up. In speaking classes, in particular, students have to orally perform in front of others and it doubles the problem for those students who are at the lower levels of language abilities. Furthermore, in most of the classrooms in Iranian universities, teachers exhibit leadership in different ways. They are the main providers of information who teach based on their experience and academic background, using the same modules for all the students in the same class regardless of their different language abilities. The learners are mostly the mere recipients of the information dictated to them and learn the content matter that has been planned in advance (Mkandawire, Maulidi, Sitima, & Luo, 2018).

The present study focused on the PA in learning, teaching, and assessment in the EFL context in higher education. Research studies examining Students-as-Partners pedagogies have traditionally been qualitative in nature with a special focus on the students and teachers' experiences (Cooper, 2014). However, in this study, it has been tried to collect quantifiable information in order to claim more confidently about the role of implementing the PA in EFL classrooms, and provide evidence of its possible impact on the learners' achievements, both in streamed and mixed-ability classes, and offer implications for teaching and learning practices within the higher education.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Background

Swain's (1985) Output Hypothesis proposes that second language acquisition is more likely to occur through language production stages when the language learner realizes the gap between what s/he knows or can say and what s/he does not know or cannot say in the target language. The idea behind students' engagement and their active participation in their own learning is reflecting on the experience of learning by doing (Healey, Solem & Pawson, 2010). In his theory of experiential learning, Kolb (1984) presents a model in which the curriculum is structured and sequenced at program and module levels. Cooperative Learning (CL) was originally based on the social constructivist view of learning which attempted to make students more responsible and instruction more relevant (Barros & Verdejo, 1998). In Cooperative Learning, students work together to solve a problem, complete a project, or achieve any other instructional goal. In such contexts, teachers supervise and monitor the group activities and provide any support or guide required.

Streaming stems from classic theories of intelligence testing according to which every individual has a fixed, general level of intelligence. Tieso (2005) claims that ability grouping of the students within a class means separating students for class activities. Along with the variety of grouping

practices, alternatives include a teaching strategy of cooperative learning, or partnership which involves certain form of grouping. Bryant (2019) maintains that the main objective in Higher Education is to remove achievement gaps by fostering partnership activities. Although there exist some subtle differences, partnership working, team working and collaboration are often used synonymously within the context of Higher Education (McKimm, Millard, & Held, 2008). Students work together toward a common goal and hold each other accountable for participation and learning progress. Amey (2010) suggests that partnership is very important at the community college level. According to Healey, et al. (2014), through partnership, a strong sense of community is built among students, as well as among students and the staff. Considering the variety of needs, objectives, expertise, and working practices, such a collaborative work or partnership activity must potentially be flexible (Whitchurch, 2013). Groups are usually heterogeneous regarding their achievements. They typically include high-achieving, low-achieving, and average-achieving students (Nattiv, 1994). Similar to ability-grouping, partnership activities have also variety of forms where the group work and the group goals are the main focus.

2.2. Empirical Background

Recent studies on the role of streaming indicate that ability-grouping is closely related to and can produce different impacts on students' academic achievement (Liu, 2009; Smith, 2011). Some studies indicated that students' retention and success would be increased through promoting a sense of community and belonging among them (Thomas, 2012). Lech, Hoople, Abiker, Mitchell, and Mooney (2017) found that partnership fostered the sense of community, belonging, and support among the participants, and it also developed the students' capacity to engage. Poole (2008) claims students in the low-ability group learn through observation and by simply interacting with the high-ability students. Mynard and Almarzouqi (2006) found that in the heterogeneous groups, higher-ability students support lower-ability ones and help their progression. It was also found that PA helped the higher ability students to consolidate their knowledge and it positively influenced their identity (Allwright, 2014). Emily, Robert, and Michael (2003) believed neither homogeneous nor heterogeneous ability grouping could be more effective in promoting students' academic achievement. Huang (2009) concluded that homogeneous grouping, relative to heterogeneous grouping, had no significant impact on the learners' mean performance.

During the last few years, many publications have addressed the concept of partnership (Bryson, 2014; Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014; Dunne & Owen, 2013). Recent studies indicate that through partnership, learners develop both their general and subject-specific language skills and qualifications that will lead to more employability chances and benefits (Crawford, Horsley, Hagyard & Derricot, 2015; Pauli, Raymond-Barker & Worrell, 2016). Some researchers have examined the value of the PA at university (Dickerson, Jarvis & Stockwell, 2016; Jarvis, Dickerson & Stockwell, 2013). In this relation, students who participated in group activities showed improvement in certain areas of language comparing to those students who worked individually (Dobao & Blum, 2013). However, few number of research studies have addressed the impact of the partnership work on undergraduate students' achievements in different institutions (Jenkins & Healey, 2015).

Khazaenezhad, Barati, and Jafarzade (2012) found no significant difference between the mean scores of the three ability groups on the final (achievement) test. Talebi and Sobhani (2012) examined the impact of Cooperative Learning on EFL learners' speaking proficiency and concluded that students in the experimental group performed significantly better on the oral interview held at the end of the course. Ahmadi, Motallebzade, and Fatemi (2014) also conducted a study on the effect of cooperative learning on intermediate students' writing achievements and found that the cooperative group performed significantly better and earned higher scores on the posttest. Buckley, Archibald, Hargraves, and Trochim (2015) also found that when the students were asked to engage in critical peer-reviews, they became motivated to willingly involve in some aspects of the assessment process.

Mazdayasna and Zaini (2015) asserted that students who were engaged in group activities performed significantly better on the test of advanced writing than students who worked individually. They further argued students who involved in group activities shared their thoughts regarding the form, content, and other aspects of their writing tasks such as spelling, mechanics, and paragraph organization. According to Zamani (2016), both high-ability and low-ability students in both homogeneous and heterogeneous groups had improved their writing ability through cooperation with either low or high proficient learners. In addition, low proficient learners in heterogeneous groups benefitted more from cooperative learning comparing to highly proficient learners.

According to the aforementioned literature review, some studies have investigated the role of streaming students based on their language abilities in their language achievement (Miilrood, 2002; Tsao, 2003), while some others have addressed the role of applying the PA in Higher Education (Bryson, 2014; Dunne & Owen, 2013; HE Academy, 2015). However, to the best of the researchers' knowledge, there have been few studies investigating the impact of the simultaneous combination of the PA and Streaming technique on the EFL learners' language learning, especially on improving their speaking skill. Hence, in the present study, the following questions were addressed.

1. Does implementing the Partnership Approach have any statistically significant impact on improving speaking skill of Iranian undergraduate EFL learners?
2. Is there any statistical significant interaction between the learners' level of language-ability and implementing the Partnership Approach with regard to speaking skill?

3. Methodology

3.1. Design and Context of the Study

The present study was a quasi-experimental research study. The study comprised both mixed-ability and streamed groups of students regarding their language abilities in six groups, three high, low, and mixed-ability groups as experimental groups, and three high, low, and mixed-ability groups as control groups. The students in the control groups were taught by the method traditionally used by the teacher in speaking classes, while PA was used as the independent variable (treatment) for the students in the experimental groups, and the extent to which the students developed their speaking ability was the dependent variable. Regarding the language skill under investigation, pretests were run to ensure the comparability of the students before beginning the experiment, and to minimize the test bias. Posttests were also run to examine the impact of the treatment. The study was accomplished in the English department at a university in Iran, which is a foreign language learning setting. In addition to the availability of the sufficient number of EFL undergraduate students and the required facilities, the IAU, Najafabad Branch was selected as the context of the study to contextualize the main issues addressed in the study and make the study as authentic as possible. The study was completed in the period between February 2018 and July 2018.

3.2. Participants

Non-probability sampling technique (convenience/opportunity sampling) was utilized for its convenience. In order to take care of possible attrition, from the total population of Iranian undergraduate students at IAU-Najafabad Branch who were majoring in TEFL, 90 students were randomly selected. An OQPT was run, and based on the results of the test, 72 students participated in the study. Twelve high language-ability, 12 low language-ability, and 12 mixed language-ability students were participated in three experimental groups. The three control groups were also formed on the same basis. They were male and female students and their ages ranged from 19 to 24.

3.3. Instruments

An OQPT (version 1) was employed as a criterion for grouping the students based on the scores they earned on the test. It consisted of 60 multiple-choice test items on vocabulary, structure, and reading comprehension. Each correct answer received one mark so that the total test score was 60 respectively. The second test was an IELTS Mock speaking test, which was used as a pretest, for all the students in all six groups. At the end of the study, a second parallel IELTS Mock speaking test was administered for all to compare the students' performances in the experimental groups and the control groups and to ensure the effectiveness of the treatment. For the purpose of data collection triangulation, 30 participants were also randomly interviewed in the researchers' office. Each speaking interview was between 10-14 minutes in length. The speaking tests comprised three clearly defined sections which were equal in value. Each section focused on different language abilities and speaking skills. Using the IELTS speaking band descriptor (0-9), the students' overall scores were awarded based on their average performance on the three parts of the test.

3.4. Data Collection Procedure

At first, in a debriefing session with the English faculty, the nature of the PA and its values were discussed and the researchers earned their consent to implement the treatment. In another debriefing session with the participants in the experimental groups, the nature of the PA, its values, the way students would be put into groups, and the way grouping work might be conducted in the class during the semester were explained by the researchers. The objective of the project was clarified, and the particular skill (speaking) to focus on was specified. The project involved a small-scale inquiry into practice initiated to enhance learning and teaching and encourage the learners' cooperation with each other and with the teacher while actively participating in designing, carrying out, and evaluating aspects of teaching and learning.

An OQPT was run to select the students as homogeneous groups regarding their language abilities. The reliability of the test was checked using the KR-21 formula ($r = 0.86$). After assigning students to different ability-groups based on the scores they earned on OQPT, they remained in the same group for the whole period of instruction. The students attended six classes; three low, high, and mixed language-ability groups as experimental groups, and three low, high, and mixed language-ability groups as control groups. Factors such as age range and attending extra language classes during the course were controlled. The students attended 90-minute speaking classes, one session a week, for 14 succeeding sessions. All the six classes were taught by the same teacher and the facilities available in the classrooms were the same for all.

An IELTS Mock speaking test was utilized as pretest for both experimental and control groups to determine their level of speaking ability as well as the areas in which the students seemed to have more problems and needed more instruction and practice, and in order to make sure about the comparability of the groups regarding their speaking abilities prior to the treatment. Partnership with a special focus on the learners' engagement as students and teacher was the treatment. The control groups were taught by the method traditionally used by the teacher in such classes. Finally, another parallel IELTS Mock speaking test was administered as the posttest to measure the possible effect of the treatment. The tests were scored based on the IELTS speaking band descriptor (0-9) by three trained and experienced EFL teachers whose scores on the IELTS speaking test were eight and above. The results were compared to examine the effect of the treatment. The reliability of the scores on the tests was checked by measuring inter-rater reliability (IRR) (Houston, 2007), utilizing Pearson Product Correlation Coefficient. The results have been presented in the Table 1 below.

Table 1: Inter-rater Reliability

	EG1	EG2	EG3	EC1	EC2	EC3
Pretest	.91	.86	.79	.81	.92	.84
Posttest	.89	.88	.83	.87	.86	.90

The purpose of the students' engagement in learning, teaching, and assessment was to include the entire class and ensure an inclusive approach to partnership. During their engagement, the students shared responsibilities so that each was responsible for the well-being of others, as well as his/her own progress. Lesson plans included activities suitable for the students in each group based on their level of language knowledge that was designed with the assistance of the learners themselves. A small-scale pilot study was carried out to test aspects of the data collection methods and sort out any unexpected problems in advance of the main data collection activities.

For every teaching or learning module, data collection activities were completed throughout the project so that data were collected at stages of particular interest. All the students participated in different aspects of the data collection activity. The teacher monitored the data collection activities and provided any guidance/assistance required by the students. Different learning strategies were employed alongside the project, involving making sentences related to the topic, role-playing, discussing the related issues and summarizing or finalizing the lesson of the modules. The students also participated in designing and developing cooperative activities such as pair/group work, open-ended activities, and closed ones.

They were encouraged to discuss each issue and ask and answer questions related to the topic. The questions were individual or group directed questions, teacher generated or students' generated questions, factual or thinking questions, and responses to the questions were dealt with by the teacher and/or the students. The collected data were shared by all members of the group. It was tried to offer as many optional activities, tasks, and assignments as possible to provide the students chances to make more sensible choices. The objectives were fostering the continuous improvement of the students' learning experiences and designing more appropriate contexts for teaching and learning through composing lessons and activities which were interesting and useful regarding the topics and at the appropriate level of difficulty regarding the students' language abilities.

The students were allowed to choose their own starting points for different assignments and activities. They were provided opportunities for frequent self-checks, and given peer-feedback during the learning and teaching process. Feedback was also provided by the teacher to support and lead the learners on their own learning. The final evaluation mainly assessed the impact of implementing the PA and learners' progress in the intended skill.

3.5. Data Analysis Procedure

Both descriptive and inferential statistics were utilized. The rationale behind collecting this kind of data was to see the extent to which the differences between certain groups of students were significant. In addition, it was intended to ensure that such possible differences were due to real factors and not to chance. Descriptive statistics were performed to compute the means and standard deviations and make sure about the normality of the distribution. In order to examine the extent to which the students' speaking abilities were improved after the application of the treatment in three experimental groups, paired sample *t* test was used to compare the scores earned on the posttest with the scores obtained on the pretest by the students in each group. This was also done for the control groups for later

comparison.

To answer the second question, analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was employed. The performances of the three experimental groups (low, high, and mixed language-ability groups) were compared to examine whether implementing the PA had equal impact on improving the speaking ability of students at different levels of language ability or not. The same was done for the control groups for later comparison. ANCOVA was also used to compare the performances of the three experimental groups with those of the three control groups for each pair of groups separately. It was utilized to make sure about having a “level playing field for the purpose of comparison” and that any obscuring or confounding effect such as the effect of pretest on posttest (students’ test-wiseness) has been removed (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 222).

4. Results

The quantitative data collected were analyzed and interpreted by means of Statistical Packages for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23. The results were as the following. In order to answer the first research question, the pretest and posttest scores of the EGs (Experimental Groups) were compared via the paired-samples *t* test. This statistical procedure was also used to compare the pretest and posttest scores of the CGs (Control Groups). To see whether the difference in the pretest and posttest mean scores of the EG learners was statistically significant or not, the researcher had to consult the *p* value under the *Sig.* column in the paired-samples *t* test table.

Table 2: Results of Paired-samples t-test for the Pretest and Posttest of EG

	Mean	N	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Partial Eta Squared
EG Pretest	4.24	36	-13.46	35	.00	.83
EG Posttest	5.45	36				

The *p* value turned out to be lower than the significance level ($p < .05$), indicating that the difference between the pretest and posttest scores of the EG learners reached statistical significance. In addition, the effect size, computed through the eta squared formula, equaled .83, which, according to Cohen (as cited in Pallant, 2010), signified a large effect.

The same procedure adopted to compare the pretest and posttest scores of the EG learners was applied to CG learners. The *p* value was less than the significance level ($.00 < .05$), which indicated that the difference between the pretest and posttest scores of the CG learners was statistically significant. The eta squared value also showed a large effect size (.71) for this comparison.

Table 3: Results of Paired-samples t-test for the Pretest and Posttest of the CG

	Mean	N	t	DF	Sig. (2-tailed)	Partial Eta Squared
CG Pretest	4.30	36	-9.27	35	.00	.71
CG Posttest	5.34	36				

Tables 4 shows the results of one-way ANCOVA, comparing the posttest scores of the EGs and CGs:

Table 4: One-Way ANCOVA Results for the Posttest of the EG and CG

Groups	Mean	Std. Deviation	N	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
EG	5.45	1.05	36	1.29	.25	.01
CG	5.34	.90	36			

The *p* value in the ANCOVA table (under the *Sig.* column) was found to be greater than the significance level ($.25 > .05$), which indicated that the difference between the posttest mean scores of

the EGs and CGs did not reach statistical significance. In fact, as it was mentioned above, both EGs and CGs improved significantly from pretest to posttest, but there was not considerable difference between them in the end.

To find an answer to the second research question, first one-way ANCOVA was used to compare the posttest scores of mixed-ability (MA), high ability (HA), and low ability (LA) learners in the EG. Then, the same statistical test was employed to compare the MA, HA, and LA learners in the CG. Finally, between-group analyses were performed using one-way ANCOVA between the scores of MA, HA, and LA learners in the experimental and control groups.

The results of descriptive statistics comparing the posttest scores of MA, HA, and LA learners in the EG showed that there were differences among the posttest mean scores of MA ($M = 5.50$), HA ($M = 6.37$), and LA ($M = 4.50$) learners in the EG. To see whether these differences were statistically significant or not, the researcher had to check the p value in the ANCOVA table below:

Table 5: One-Way ANCOVA Results for the Posttest of MA, HA, and LA Learners in the EG

Level	Mean	Adjusted Mean	Std. Deviation	N	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
MA	5.50	5.85	.82	12	12.35	.00	.43
HA	6.37	5.53	.80	12			
LA	4.50	4.98	.56	12			

The p value corresponding to the Groups row of the table was less than the significance level ($.00 < .05$), implying that the differences among the MA, HA, and LA learners in the EG were statistically significant. ANCOVA compared the pretest scores of the groups to see if there were pre-existing differences between the groups, and then made adjustments and compared the posttest scores accordingly.

Table 6: Post Hoc Test Results for the Posttest Scores of MA, HA, and LA Learners in the EG

(I) Level	(J) Level	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval for Difference	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
MA	HA	.31	.22	.50	-.25	.88
	LA	.86*	.17	.00	.42	1.30
HA	MA	-.31	.22	.50	-.88	.25
	LA	.54	.23	.08	-.05	1.14
LA	MA	-.86*	.17	.00	-1.30	-.42
	HA	-.54	.23	.08	-1.14	.05

The adjusted mean scores of the MA, HA, and LA learners in the EG were 5.85, 5.53, and 4.93, respectively. The difference between the MA ($M = 5.85$) and LA ($M = 4.98$) learners in the EG was found to be statistically significant, but the difference between MA and HA ($M = 5.53$) was not of statistical significance, and nor was the difference between HA and LA learners in the EG. The results showed that there were differences among the posttest mean scores of MA ($M = 4.58$), HA ($M = 6.04$), and LA ($M = 5.41$) learners in the CG. To find out whether these differences were statistically significant or not, the researchers had to examine the p value in the ANCOVA table below.

Table 7: One-Way ANCOVA Results for the Posttest Scores of MA, HA, and LA Learners in the CG

Level	Mean	Adjusted Mean	Std. Deviation	N	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
MA	4.58	4.98	.73	12	25.31	.00	.61
HA	6.04	4.97	.86	12			
LA	5.41	6.08	.41	12			

The p value was less than the significance level ($.00 < .05$), indicating that the differences among the MA, HA, and LA learners in the CG reached statistical significance.

Table 8: Post Hoc Test Results for the Posttest Scores of MA, HA, and LA Learners in the CG

(I) Level	(J) Level	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval for Difference	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
MA	HA	.00	.22	1.00	-.56	.57
	LA	-1.10*	.15	.00	-1.50	-.70
HA	MA	-.00	.22	1.00	-.57	.56
	LA	-1.11*	.25	.00	-1.74	-.48
LA	MA	1.10*	.15	.00	.70	1.50
	HA	1.11*	.25	.00	.48	1.74

The difference between the MA ($M = 4.98$) and LA ($M = 6.08$) learners in the CG was found to be statistically significant. Also there was a significant difference between the HA ($M = 4.97$) and LA ($M = 6.08$) learners, but the difference between MA and HA learners in the CG was not of statistical significance.

On the posttest, the mean scores of MA learners in the EG ($M = 5.50$) was greater than the mean score of their counterparts in the CG ($M = 4.58$). To come up with more illuminating results regarding the second research question of the study, the posttest scores of the MA learners in the EG and CG were compared using a one-way ANCOVA.

Table 9: One-Way ANCOVA Results for the Posttest Scores of MA Learners in the EG and CG

Groups	Mean	Std. Deviation	N	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
EG	5.50	.82	12	62.73	.00	.74
CG	4.58	.73	12			

Since the p value was lower than the significance level ($.00 < .05$), it could be concluded that the MA learners in the EG significantly outperformed their MA counterparts in the CG. The posttest scores of the HA learners in the EG and CG were compared using one-way ANCOVA. The posttest mean scores of HA learners in the EG ($M = 6.37$) was greater than the mean score of their HA counterparts in the CG ($M = 6.04$). The p value determined whether this difference reached statistical significance or not:

Table 10: One-Way ANCOVA Results for the Posttest Scores of HA Learners in the EG and CG

Groups	Mean	Std. Deviation	N	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
EG	6.37	.80	12	10.61	.00	.33
CG	6.04	.86	12			

As the p value was less than the significance level ($.00 < .05$), indicating that the HA learners in the EG significantly outperformed their HA counterparts in the CG. The posttest scores of the LA learners in

the EG and CG were also compared via one-way ANCOVA. The posttest mean scores of LA learners in the EG ($M = 4.50$) was found to be smaller than the mean score of their LA counterparts in the CG ($M = 5.41$). To see whether this difference reached statistical significance or not, the researcher had to consult the p value.

Table 11: One-Way ANCOVA Results for the Posttest Scores of LA Learners in the EG and CG

Groups	Mean	Std. Deviation	<i>N</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	Partial Eta Squared
EG	4.50	.56	12	32.06	.00	.60
CG	5.41	.41	12			

Because the p value corresponding to the Groups row was smaller than the significance level ($.00 < .05$), it could be construed that LA learners in the CG significantly outperformed their counterparts in the EG.

5. Discussion

Foreign language learning and teaching can be considered a widely advocated area of interest in education. The importance of the learners' roles and the emphasis on learner-centered education during the past decades have spurred education to an urgent reform (Johnson, 2013). Such a learner-centered approach recognizes individual differences and the need for treating individual students differently.

To address the first research question in this study, it was found that students in both experimental and control groups developed their speaking ability; however, no statistically significant difference existed between the two groups in the end which was contrary to Dobao and Blum (2013), Pauli, et al. (2016), and Zamani (2016). One important advantage of Students-as-Partners was that it encouraged students' involvement and provided more opportunities for interaction between students and the teacher, as well as among the students themselves which was in line with Buckley, et al. (2015). Furthermore, students in the experimental groups claimed that their learning and retention were fostered due to developing a sense of community, belonging, and support, as well as practicing doing the tasks and activities which were at an appropriate level of difficulty. It was also supported by Lech, et al. (2017), and Thomas, (2012).

Streaming students regarding their language abilities made it easier for the teacher to manage the available teaching time in a more reasonable way, plan the teaching, and adapt the method or the content of teaching and learning based on the students' command of the language. Moreover, students received more realistic materials or measurement criteria. Therefore, instead of competing against each other, students cooperated with their peers and the teacher. To address the second research question, although from the mean scores of the students in the experimental groups it was inferred that high language-ability students performed better than the mixed language-ability students and mixed language-ability students performed better than the low language-ability ones, the results of the post hoc study revealed that development in the performances of the students in the low and high language-ability groups were not significantly different. This finding was in line with Khazaeenezhad, et al. (2012). However, development in the performances of the students in the low and mixed language-ability groups were significantly different. Mixed-ability group performed significantly better than the low-ability group. In addition, PA positively influenced higher competency students' identity and view of themselves in the mixed language-ability group. They were more frequently asked for help or leadership and consolidated their knowledge by explaining the material to the weaker members of the group which was in line with Allwright (2014). Hence, in the mixed language-ability group, all

members, low or high language-ability, challenged to improve. The same finding was reported by Ballantine and Larres (2007).

In the control groups, high-ability students performed significantly better than the other groups. The difference was statistically significant between low and high as well as between mixed and low language-ability students. However, low language-ability students performed significantly better than the mixed language-ability group.

All in all, although ability-grouping protected the low-ability students from peer-pressure, in the experimental group, low-ability students did not develop their speaking ability as much as the other groups, and so employing the PA in streamed language classes is not recommended for them. Firstly, low-ability students lacked the sufficient knowledge and experience in using the language, and were not competent enough to take advantage of the PA in learning. Secondly, giving the low-ability students the chance to do optional activities or developing the instructional material which was of their interest and at their level of language-ability, had the disadvantage of letting them choose the easier way or less demanding material and tasks, in spite of their abilities to engage in more challenging ways of learning.

Mixed-ability teaching benefited the low-ability students more which was supported by Poole (2008). It helped them feel more self-confident and develop their self-esteem. When weaker students encountered difficulties or had problems in doing the tasks, they could ask their more proficient partners for assistance. Such a claim is also underpinned by Mynard and Almarzouqi (2006). It was motivating and inspired the weaker students to do their best in order to reach the same competency level as their stronger partners. There were more quality discussions and more signs of self-efficiency in mixed language-ability groups both in the experimental and the control groups.

6. Conclusion

Heterogeneity or having mixed-ability EFL classes seems to be an inevitable condition. On the other hand, considering the incessant change in the learners' needs and abilities, teachers and academic staff are expected to have an optimistic approach and take into account new techniques, methods, and directions to employ each year. Hence, teachers should motivate students' engagement and their critical thinking by offering opportunities to think differently and act in new ways so that they will be able to concentrate and grasp the teaching material more easily.

The partnership entities can impact on students' learning and their development in terms of how well students will learn, how far they will go, and what they will be able to do, provided that they have already gained a certain level of proficiency in the language and developed the ability to employ different learning strategies appropriately. It is necessary to identify areas in which students and teachers are partnering to raise up the effectiveness of the partnership and the chance of improvement. Many factors influence the selection of the appropriate engagement strategies and the success of the partnership programs in education such as teachers' and students' attitudes, the students' proficiency levels, their language and cultural background, the nature of the classes, the objectives of the course, the students' ages, and the time limit.

It is difficult to confidently claim that any change in the students' achievements can be attributed to their ability-grouping, employing partnership as a new teaching approach, or the combination of the two. Students' perception of their own participation, their meaningful and authentic engagement in whatever is going on in the class, introducing more appropriate instructional material concerning their content and difficulty level, and good rapport between the teacher and the students are among the factors that influence the effectiveness of such programs. Students and the staff should be educated about the values and benefits of the PA to improve the quality of the educational program. Moreover, the teacher and the university staff also need to establish a genuine positive two-way relationship.

The present study calls for the teachers' attention that it is important to be informed about the new approaches and teaching strategies which best work in their mixed language-ability classes. This may highlight the need for the regular teacher training programs in the Higher Education settings. EFL teaching and learning, particularly at university level, need to shift from traditional approaches to more modern and innovative ones to bring about substantial modification in Higher Education. Language teachers should motivate students' active participation in the learning process, and enhance their critical thinking and problem-solving abilities. Teachers should be able to build up a rapport with their students, create an appropriate learning atmosphere, and promote quality teaching in their classes so that students at different language-ability levels readily get involved and can reach their learning potential. They need to attend more to the students' feelings and abilities, and provide activities and ways in which students can freely participate and take responsibilities. Students should be helped to reflect on their progress. Education policy makers and university administrators need to modify their policies and practices. Finally, authorities must direct more support to the teachers by providing the required facilities and offering opportunities for more collaboration among the staff.

This study presents some limitations which should be taken into account and can be the focus of future related studies. The larger sample size was not available to the researchers, therefore, the results of this study are not generalizable to the EFL learners and teachers at any EFL learning context. Secondly, because an unequal number of male and female EFL learners participated in the study, the role of participants' gender has not been taken care of by the researchers. In future studies, interested researchers can carry out more studies on the role of employing the PA and grouping students in different disciplines, for the learners at different age ranges or of different genders, and for the learners of varying language backgrounds.

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