

## The Impact of the Participatory Approach on EFL learners' Language Proficiency with a Focus on Teachers' Perspective

<sup>1</sup>Neda Fatehi Rad\*

<sup>2</sup>Rahman Sahragard

IJEAP- 1906-1393

### Abstract

The current study set out to investigate the impact of the participatory approach on the language proficiency of EFL learners. Moreover, the study aimed at probing into the effect of the participatory approach on learning grammar and vocabulary. Additionally, the study sought to explore the attitudes of teachers in this regard. The initial participants of the study were 60 Iranian EFL learners from two intact classes. Out of the original 60 students, 39 participants whose scores on the language proficiency test fell within  $\pm 1$  standard deviation of the mean, attended all treatment sessions and completed all test booklets included in the final analyses. For fourteen sessions, regular teaching practice through the conventional book-based method of conducting an English class ensued. In the experimental group; however, the participatory approach tasks and activities were adopted, in which various participatory approach-based techniques, activities, role play, problem-solving activities, group work and collaborative tasks in the classroom instruction were implemented. The results of statistical analyses indicated that there was no statistically significant difference between the performance of the participatory approach group and the conventional approach group on the language proficiency test. However, the results of further statistical analyses revealed that the participatory approach had a positive effect on the participants' knowledge of vocabulary and grammar. Results of the interview with the teachers revealed that they had positive attitudes towards implementing the participatory approach and they were willing to use at least some of the tasks and activities in their future courses. Based on the findings of the present study, EFL teachers are encouraged to use participatory activities in teaching English.

**Keywords:** Participatory approach, Collaborative task, EFL teachers, EFL learners, Academic achievement, Language proficiency

### 1. Introduction

Significant changes have occurred in the field of language teaching and second language acquisition within the last 20 years, changes such as using task-based teaching, which are the consequences of communicative language teaching trend (Ellis, 2008) and the emergence of post method era. While the main focus of these new methods has been to provide the deserved attention to all four skills of language by involving EFL learners in teaching and learning process, post method pedagogy added the issue of considering the reality of the lives of English as Second Language (ESL) students and those of lecturers as a significant tool that results in positive outcomes of teaching and learning. It included being concerned with real-life communication in the L2 classroom and engaging students with optimal opportunities to enhance their fluency in achieving language skills beyond the classroom (Motlhaka & Wadesango, 2014).

---

<sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor (Corresponding Author), nedafatehi@yahoo.com; Department of English Language, Qeshm Branch, Islamic Azad University, Qeshm, Iran/Department of English Language, Kerman Branch, Islamic Azad University, Kerman, Iran.

<sup>2</sup> Professor, rahman.sahragard@gmail.com; Department of Foreign Languages and Linguistics, Shiraz University, Shiraz, Iran.

While it did not reject conventional teaching methods, it provided alternatives to the deficiencies experienced by these methods (Can, 2008, Khany & Darabi, 2014). According to Kumaravadivelu (2003, 2006), the post method pedagogy is the optimal way of teaching English to reshape the character and content of L2 teaching, teacher education, and classroom activities. It, therefore, makes ESL teachers be aware of and justify their teaching process based on their teaching experiences and knowledge of methods to construct their own methods as evaluators, observers, critical thinkers, theorizers, and ESL practitioners. In this paradigm, teachers are encouraged to explore what works and what does not work using what Brown (2007) calls an enlightened and eclectic method to deal with ESL students' language deficiency.

Kumaravadivelu (2006) introduced three types of interaction in language classroom: (1) interaction as textual activity where students modify their linguistic resources to maximize the chances of mutual understanding and reduce communication breakdown; (2) interaction as an interpersonal activity which helps students to negotiate and co-construct meanings of the utterances; and (3) interaction as an ideational activity which fits students' linguistic and discoursal resources with social, cultural and political context.

In addition, these three types of interaction could help teachers to consider communicative and interactional competences in designing ESL syllabi and teaching materials. In order for teachers to effectively adopt Kumaravadivelu's three types of interaction in the ESL classroom, they should theorize what they practice and practice what they theorize. This stance provides teachers with a theoretical understanding of language pedagogy which is socially-realistic and contextually-sensitive to ESL teaching. This also discourages teachers to rely on prescriptive approaches and methods from established authorities, but explore their own teaching approaches and methods to understand their strengths and limitations so that they can appropriately adapt their teaching procedures (Saville-Troike, 2006).

Despite all the above-mentioned theoretical aspects of language teaching, the major aim of the teaching-learning process is achievement in terms of grades (Harman & Nguyen, 2010), as it is generally the sole measure of learning in many cases of language education in both school and institute context in Iran. To achieve this target, teachers use diverse teaching methods, to help language learners achieve their goals, as in the case of this study passing the required scores on a standardized proficiency test. Among all these most widely accepted and practiced is the lecture. To bring the theoretical issues raised in post method era into outcome-based classes, this study puts more emphasis on teaching through participatory teaching method, which presumes that team effort of students towards the single goal of learning a particular aspect result in more understanding than solo efforts. Even though this method has many salient features for improving the teaching-learning process, it is not practiced normally due to various reasons including time and energy required to manage its activities. Participatory teaching can be defined as a teaching method that involves students in the learning process in order to understand and learn (Slavin, 2011). Traditional class activities create a win-win situation, where one can only succeed if others loose, while cooperative learning is the direct opposite to it, here conquest of all is success of all. Collaborative learning is seen at the heart of this participatory approach and has its edge over other teaching methods in terms of its effectiveness for improved cognition, social skills, and motivation. Two major attributes that have distinguished such collaborative learning from traditional learning include interdependence (positive) as well as accountability, as each member of a group is important for success (Slavin, 1990). Its competence in terms of augmenting academic achievement has been proved through many research studies (McMaster & Fuchs, 2002; Johnson, Johnson & Stanne, 2000, Nichols, 2002, Winston, 2002). Collaborative learning also improves positive attitude towards learning (Johnson & Johnson, 2008), improved social relations (Johnson & Johnson, 2005), in addition to high self-esteem and cohesiveness (Sahin, 2010). This approach to learning can be also stated in terms of instructional strategy in which students work together to achieve learning target (Abrami, Poulsen & Chambers, 2004). It is also argued by Polloway, Patton, and Serna (2001) that such participatory learning method, when used as a teaching activity, improves motivation, class participation and academic achievement of students.

Drawing upon the findings of the previous studies in the related literature, the present study's concern is to investigate the potential effects of the participatory approach on the academic achievement of EFL learners. Roschelle and Teasley define collaboration as "mutual engagement of participants in a coordinated effort to solve a problem together," (as cited in Dillenbourg et al., 1996, p. 2). Roschelle (1992) frames collaboration as an exercise in convergence or construction of shared meanings and notes that research on conversational analysis has identified features of interactions that enable participants to reach convergence through the construction, monitoring, and repairing of shared knowledge. In participatory approach to teaching and learning, students are actively engaged in their own learning process and collaborate with others (Cobb, 1994; Greeno, 1998; as cited in Handelzalts, McKenney, Pieters, Voogt, Vries, Westbroek, Walraven, 2011).

Collaborative learning has been shown to encourage the growth of student interdependence (Bruffee, 1999), responsibility (Totten, Sills, Digby, & Russ, 1991), interpersonal skills (Rymes, 1997), and cognitive and critical thinking skills (Johnson & Johnson, 1986). Recent second language acquisition research has demonstrated a need for classroom activities that promote communicative interaction in second language classrooms (Doughty & Williams, 1998; Ellis, 2003, 2005; Williams, 2005). One way of promoting such opportunities is through pedagogical tasks that encourage negotiation of meaning (Ellis, 2003; Yuan & Ellis, 2003). In this relation, classroom tasks that require learners to work together and produce output collaboratively have been suggested to provide effective opportunities for peer feedback and scaffolding (Lapkin & Swain, 2000; Swain, 2001, 2005). From a sociocultural perspective, social interaction and collaboration are important requirements for learning. According to Vygotsky (1986), individual cognitive development cannot be achieved by isolated learning and that learning is in essence, a social enterprise. Central to the Vygotskian sociocultural theory is the notion of ZPD (zone of proximal development), which refers to "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). The notion of ZPD highlights the importance of collaborative work because it is believed that when learners collaborate within their ZPD, they use their existing knowledge to develop what they have not yet mastered independently (Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994; Nassaji & Swain, 2000). Also, when learners interact, particularly with a more knowledgeable learner, a supportive environment can be created in which the less capable participant can be helped to expand and elevate his or her language skills to higher levels of competence (Appel & Lantolf, 1994). Meanwhile, the more capable participant is likely to consolidate his or her existing knowledge when using it to provide help and assistance.

Much of the research on collaborative and participatory approach is rooted in the work of Piaget and Vygotsky (Dillenbourg et al., 1996). In fact, socio-constructivists borrow Piaget's system of developmental stages describing children's cognitive progress, as well as her ideas related to cognitive conflict, which refers to the sense of dissonance experienced when one becomes aware of the discrepancy between one's existing cognitive framework and new information or experiences. Adopting a sociocultural perspective, the present study attempts to explore how participation in collaborative learning tasks can impact EFL students' achievement and performance. In so doing, the researcher will try to explore the issue from the teacher's perspectives.

## 2. Literature Review

According to Socio-cultural Theory, human cognitive development is a socially situated activity mediated by language (Vygotsky, 1978), that is knowledge is socially constructed by interaction and is then internalized. Individuals learn how to carry out a new function with the help of an expert (in an expert/novice pair) and then they can perform it individually. Vygotsky (1978) establishes two levels of development: the developmental level of a novice, that is, the level of what an individual can do without help, and the potential level of development, or what that individual can do with the help of an expert. The distance between the

two is known as the ZPD and is considered as a key variable in intellectual development. If the distance between the two levels is so great that it cannot be bridged, then no development will occur. The dialogic process by means of which a speaker helps another speaker bridges the gap and performs a new function is known as scaffolding and includes the social and affective support mutually provided by participants during interaction (Ellis, 2000). Recent studies (Storch, 2002; Swain & Lapkin, 2001) demonstrate the impact of peer-peer dialogue on second language learning. Through interaction learners regulate or restructure their knowledge; therefore, learning, cognition, and interaction are closely connected.

Thus, the socio-cultural approach claims that interaction is an opportunity to learn. During interaction, learners are given the possibility to develop not only their linguistic skills but their cognitive and problem-solving capacities as well. Some authors have studied interaction to discover how dialogue is used as a cognitive tool (Donato & Lantolf, 1990). From this perspective, the collaborative dialogue is language learning mediated by language (Swain, 2000). Participants build knowledge through metatalk as they perform the task, and the interaction reveals the mental processes of the interlocutors, the support they provide to each other, as well as the mechanisms they use to adjust the complexity of the task, facilitating its regulation. Both LaPierre (1994) and Swain and Lapkin (1998) demonstrated that LREs are occasions for learning. A crucial aspect of collaborative dialogue seems to be verbalization. Swain (2000) concludes that verbalization is a powerful cognitive tool for mediating the internalization of meaning created and claims that collaborative dialogue is particularly useful for learning language processes as well as grammatical aspects of language.

Task research within the sociocultural framework has aimed to demonstrate how scaffolding can help students to reach a satisfactory solution when performing a task. Donato (1994) described how a group of students was able to produce a specific grammar structure jointly, although none of them was able to do it individually. The knowledge constructed in collaboration was internalized and could be used individually on subsequent occasions. Scaffolding studies share a qualitative, interpretative case-study perspective on L2 instruction that allows the observation of language development at the moment it is taking place (Guerrero & Villamil, 2000). Empirical studies of peer revision in writing classes suggest that certain students' attitudes and behaviors are more facilitative than others in providing support. Showing affectivity, making effective use of discourse strategies such as advising, eliciting and requesting clarification, and using the L1 to maintain control of the task have been identified as facilitative language learning processes (Guerrero & Villamil, 2000; Swain & Lapkin, 2001).

Thus, the concept of output has been extended to be considered as a socially-constructed cognitive tool. As such, dialogue serves to learn the L2 by mediating its own construction (Swain, 2000). By means of external speech, internalization of knowledge is facilitated. This position is an additional reason in favor of the use of collaborative work in L2 learning. Highlighting the importance of collaboration, the study carried out by Swain and Lapkin (2001) investigated the impact of a dictogloss, using a jigsaw task. In the study, the participants were supposed to produce a written story after watching a set of photos. The students in two different French immersion classes were requested to accomplish one of the two different tasks. The findings indicated that both tasks yielded a rather similar and large amount of language-related episodes. But the results showed no significant difference with respect to the impact of the two types of tasks on the learners' attention. No significant difference was observed between the two groups' post-test scores either, indicating that the two kinds of task resulted in comparable degrees of language gains. In the same vein, Kowal and Swain (1994) conducted a study on dictogloss (a special form of collaborative output task). Dictogloss is a pedagogical task whereby students are encouraged to collaborate in order to reconstruct a text after its oral presentation. The findings of the study showed that due to their involvement in the so-called co-production of language through collaborative tasks, students can take notice of some gaps in their knowledge of the language. This drew their attention to the connection between form and meaning, helping them to gain feedback from their peers.

Storch (2005) carried out a study to examine the effect of collaborative activities. This was done through comparing participants' written texts as they completed them in pair work or individually. The study tested both the product of the participants' writings as well as the features of the interaction among these students during collaboration. The findings of the study showed that the collaborative pair work led to many useful opportunities for interaction and the chances for the exchange of the ideas among the participants. Such a co-working also led to more peer feedback. Besides, the findings revealed that participants in the collaborative group produced shorter texts while writing more accurately with respect to grammar and more complex texts than the participants who wrote texts individually. However, the statistical results showed no significant difference between the individual and pair work. The researcher gave the shortness of the text or the small size of the sample as the two main reasons for the lack of statistical significance. In their study, Watanabe and Swain (2007) examined the impact of L2 proficiency differences on second language learning through examining the patterns of interaction in pairs.

The study used three different forms of the task:

- individual writing
- pair writing
- pair comparison

The criteria for making a comparison between the structures produced by each pair consisted of language-related episodes (LRP), along with the features of pair interaction and participants' post-test score. The findings indicated that collaborative patterns of interaction led to higher posttest scores, i.e., regardless of the learners' level of proficiency. That is, the level of proficiency made no significant differences in learners' performance.

Nassaji and Tian (2010) carried out a study to shed light on the potential impact of two kinds of output tasks, i.e., reconstruction cloze tasks and reconstruction editing tasks on learning phrasal verbs in English. The study was aimed at shedding light on whether collaborative task completion could lead to enhanced knowledge of the target phrasal verbs compared to individual task completion. The other aim was to find out whether differences in task kinds would lead to any difference. The successful completion of the tasks by the learners and also the degree of vocabulary knowledge gain was included as two criteria for the effective contribution of the tasks. The results showed that collaborative task completion (in pairs) led to higher accuracy of task completion than doing the tasks individually. But the findings showed no superiority of collaborative activities vs. individual task completion in terms of the amount of gains of vocabulary knowledge. The results showed some differences in participants' performance regarding the impact of the types of tasks used. The editing tasks were found to be more effective than the cloze tasks in enhancing the negotiation among learners as well as their L2 forms learning. These findings are consistent with the studies investigating the relative effectiveness of pedagogical activities in L2 acquisition.

Abadikhah and Shahriyarpour (2012) examined the contribution of output tasks to individual and collaborative setting in learning English passive verb forms. They sought to examine the issue by investigating the completion of output task in both individual and collaborative tasks. The findings of their investigation revealed that out of three treatment types, input enhancement with individual text editing task and collaborative editing were relatively more instrumental in improving learners' passive forms acquisition.

Similarly, Jabbarpour and Tajeddin (2013) examined the impact of input enhancement, individual output, and collaborative output, which are considered as three focus-on-form tasks. The sample of this study was made up of ninety B.A. students enrolled in TEFL. They participated in three different tasks that were concerned with textual enhancement, individual dictogloss collaborative dictogloss. The researcher aimed to assess the progress in the production of the L2 forms produced by the participants, using a time-series design. To this end, the researcher administered a pre-test and a post-test along with three production

tests to the learners to evaluate the development trend in each group. The results revealed that the input and collaborative output tasks were more helpful than the individual output task. In addition, the findings showed no linear additive process in the development among the individual output group. However, a rather U-shaped trend was found with backsliding. Most of the studies mentioned above uphold the important role of collaborative activities in paving the way for both interactions among L2 learners and the acquisition of various language elements. Given the importance of the participatory approach, the present study sought to find answers to the following research questions:

**RQ1:** Is there a statistically significant difference between the performance of the participatory approach group and the conventional approach group on the language proficiency test?

**RQ2:** Are other language components (grammar and vocabulary) positively influenced through the implementation of the Participatory Approach?

**RQ3:** What are the effects of applying a Participatory Approach on learning English at the intermediate level from the teachers' perspective?

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Design of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of the participatory approach implementation on EFL students' achievement and performance and its effectiveness on teaching and learning from teachers' points of view. The study is a mixture of both qualitative and quantitative research methods (MMR). In fact, a triangulation procedure has been adopted through using tests, and interviews with teachers to collect data. The study involves a mixed-method design, including an experimental phase pre-test, treatment, post-test, plus a qualitative procedure that includes an interview with the teachers observing the experimental group's class. The analysis of the collected data was both quantitative and qualitative. The quantitative analyses of the study cover the impact of the independent variable of the study, implementation of participatory approach in EFL classes, on the dependent variable of the study, EFL learners' achievement which was measured on a ratio scale. The usual focus in qualitative studies is on the meaning of the information collected by content analysis, in a more descriptive manner (Bardin, 1977; Ericsson & Simon, 1984). As explained in Miles and Huberman (1994), these qualitative and quantitative analyses are proceeded through coding the information into categories or levels looking for similarities and differences among data. Munn and Drever (1990) stated that when the participants respond to different instruments in the same way, the data become more reliable.

#### 3.2. Subjects

This study was conducted with a total of 60 EFL students in two intact classes. The reason behind choosing intact classes was that the researcher did not have a chance to access different institutes and/or classes on a randomized basis. Due to the administrative constraints, she faced for implementing the participatory approach, she had to rely on the available classes to her only. The participants attended the English department of Azad University of Kerman, as EFL students. All of them had studied English translation at this university for one academic year. Both male and female students participated in the study. Students' age, gender, and educational backgrounds were not taken into consideration due to the fact that they were found to be effective on learners language achievement (Brown, 2010, Munoz & Singleton, 2011, Kobayashi, 2002; Oxford, 1993). Out of the original 60 students, 39 participants whose scores on the language proficiency test fell within  $\pm 1$  standard deviation (9.21) of the mean score (92.49), attended all treatment sessions and completed all test booklets. The faculty members who observed the class during sessions were also interviewed to be aware of their attitude toward the method.

### 3.3. Instruments

#### 3.3.1. Proficiency Test

Before the treatment session began, all participants took part in a paper-based TOEFL proficiency test from ETS administrated in 2004. This test was used to check the homogeneity of the group in terms of their entry proficiency level. The test comprised 50 multiple-choice listening comprehension tests, 40 multiple-choice questions of structure and written expression and 50 multiple-choice reading comprehension questions. The reliability of the test was found to be .78 using KR-21.

#### 3.3.2. Pre-Test and Post-Test

As the main purpose of the study is to investigate the effects of the participatory approach on the academic achievement of Iranian EFL learners in terms of their language proficiency test, a standard academic IELTS test has been used as the instrument for pre-test and post-test to collect data on their performances. A standard academic IELTS test comprises four sections that contain 40 questions on listening, 40 questions on reading, a three-part interview section and two tasks on writing. IELTS test is appropriate for participants because they are university students, although are intermediate level. However, prior to hypothesis testing, the reliability of the test scores had to be calculated. As mentioned earlier, one rater evaluated the participants' scores on the speaking test and writing test. In order to ensure the reliability of the rater's scoring speaking and writing scores, she scored the speaking performance and writing drafts of 15 EFL learners of the same level of proficiency. The scores from two speaking performances and the scores from two administrations of the same writing tests which were held with a two-week interval was considered for reliability analysis.

#### 3.3.3. Teacher Interviews

Drawing on the previous studies in the related literature, a semi-structured interview was designed by the researcher, for the teachers who participated in the study in order to investigate their attitudes towards the implementation of the participatory approach in the Iranian EFL context. Since the interview provides an opportunity for digging into teachers' perception, according to Irvine, Drew, and Sainsbury (2013), and through clarifications of answers and positions, the researcher relied on this technique considering the number of participants. The questions were designed carefully by the researcher after consulting the past studies (Tsui & Ng, 2000; Hung, 2015, Austin, 2001; Martínez, 2003), and checked by the members of the English Department at the same university where the study was conducted.

#### 3.3.4. Vocabulary and Grammar Test

To find answers to the second research question on the effect of implementing participatory approach on subskills, a vocabulary and grammar test was designed based on the contents of the regular conversation course the participants studied during the experimental phase of the study. The test consisted of fifteen multiple-choice items of grammar and fifteen multiple-choice items of vocabulary, which was piloted on a group of 11 learners. The test composed of both pre and post test stage. The test was piloted to a group of 11 learners. Pearson correlation test was used to test the reliability of the test which was tested through test-retest method.

#### 3.3.5. Data Collection Procedure

As it was mentioned earlier, two intact classes took part in the study. In the first step, before the treatment sessions began, all participants took part in a paper-based TOEFL proficiency test. The test was used to check the homogeneity of the group in terms of their entry proficiency level. Out of the original 60 students, 39 participants whose scores on the language proficiency test fell within  $\pm 1$  standard deviation of the mean score, attended all treatment sessions and completed all test booklets. 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 assigned 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 tasks and activities 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 participatory approach-based techniques, activities, role play, problem solving activities, group work and collaborative tasks in the classroom instruction. In order to include the attitudes of the teachers in the study, five members of the English department at the same university were invited to regularly observe the participatory class on a regular basis so that they could share their ideas about this approach at least once. 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 faculty members who observed the intervention session were interviewed to check their attitudes toward the participatory approach.

### 3.3.6. Data Analysis Procedures

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. Due to the fact that the distribution of the data was not normal, Mann-Whitney test was conducted in order to compare the results of IELTS pretest scores of the experimental and the control groups. Also to have a comparison of the two groups' scores on the IELTS posttest, another instance of Mann-Whitney test was utilized. In addition, with regard to the normality of the distribution of the data, two other Paired Samples Tests were run to compare the performances of the experimental and control groups on vocabulary and grammar pretest and posttests. As regards to the descriptive data collected through the qualitative research procedure including results of the interview with the students and the teachers, the qualitative analysis proceeded to code the information into categories or levels looking for similarities and differences among data. Similarly, in this study, qualitative data was gathered by interview 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.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Results Related to Research Question One

The first research question of the present study was: Will the employment of Participatory Approach in EFL classes be effective in terms of improving intermediate EFL learners' academic achievements? In order to answer this research question, the scores obtained from the IELTS administration before and after intervention were considered. In order to investigate this research question, the researcher compared the pretest and posttest scores of the participatory group and the control group. Moreover, the pretest and posttest scores obtained from each group were compared. The results are shown in the following tables.

Table 1: 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 mean score for the participatory group was 3.89 on a nine-point scale and the standard deviation was 0.20. Moreover, the mean score of the control group on the same test was 3.80 and the standard deviation was 0.37. 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 2: 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 mean score for the participatory group was 4.26 on a nine-point scale and the standard deviation was 0.53. Moreover, the mean score of the control group on the same test was 4.02 and the standard deviation was 0.37. The results showed that the control group's mean score is lower than that 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 3: Normality Test for Pretest Scores

	Group	Kolmogorov-Smirnova			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 the experimental and control groups, for both sets of scores the Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test of Normality was conducted. As Table 3 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, a non-parametric test had to be used to test the hypotheses. In order to compare the results of IELTS pretest scores of the experimental and the control groups, the Mann-Whitney test was conducted.

Table 4: Mann-Whitney Test for Comparing Pretest Scores of the Experimental and Control Groups

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

It can be inferred from Table 4 that the difference between the IELTS pretest mean scores (U= 176.00, p=.60) was not statistically significant since the obtained p-value is more than 0.05. Therefore, the difference seen in Table 4 is negligible. In other words, there was no statistically significant difference between the performance of the experimental group and that of the control group on the pre-test. Table 5 illustrates the results of Mann-Whitney test for comparing posttest scores of the experimental and control groups.

Table 5: Mann-Whitney Test for Comparing Posttest Scores of the Experimental and Control Groups

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

It can be understood from Table 5 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 2 is negligible. In other words, it can be concluded that the first hypothesis of the study which holds that “there is no statistically significant difference between the performance of the participatory approach group and the conventional approach group on the language proficiency test” was accepted regarding the fact that the participatory approach did not lead to a statistically significant difference in the IELTS posttest for the experimental group as compared with the performance of the control group who were treated with the conventional approach. However, further analysis showed that this approach was similar to the conventional approach in improving the learner's general language ability suggesting that both approaches had positive effects on learners' language improvement as compared with their performance on the pretest.

Table 6: Progress in IELTS Scores in the Experimental and Control Groups

	IELTS Pretest for Experimental Group - IELTS Posttest for Experimental Group	IELTS Pretest for Control Group - IELTS Posttest for Control Group
Z	-2.640a	-2.121a
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.008	.034

Table 6 shows that participatory groups' scores improved significantly ( $Z= 2.60$ ,  $p= .00$ ) and the control group's scores ( $Z= 2.12$ ,  $p= .03$ ) on the posttest and the IELTS posttest scores were significantly higher than the pretest for both groups. In other words, it can be claimed that both interventions, participatory and conventional ones, were similarly effective in improving the IELTS scores of the learners in this study. As a result, the first hypothesis holding that “the employment of Participatory Approach in EFL classes will not be effective in terms of improving intermediate EFL learners' academic achievements was accepted. However, the difference between the performance of the experimental group and that of the control group on the posttest was not statistically significant.

#### 4.2. Results Related to Research Question Two

Considering the potential effects of the participatory approach and collaborative tasks, a second research question was put forward above, i.e. “Are other language components positively influenced through the implementation of Participatory Approach?” In order to answer this research question, the third null hypothesis was formulated: Other language components are not positively influenced through the implementation of the Participatory Approach. As stated earlier, the vocabulary and grammar test was a researcher-made test, which was piloted to a group of 11 learners. In order to test the hypothesis, the pretest and posttest scores of the two groups were compared. The results are shown below:

Table 7: Descriptive Statistics of the Vocabulary and Grammar Pretest

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Language Pretest	Control	20	3.8750	.60426	.13512
	Experimental	19	15.2632	1.55785	.35740
	Control	20	14.5000	1.67017	.37346

The mean score for the participatory group was 15.26 on a thirty-point scale and the standard deviation was 1.55. Moreover, the mean score of the control group on the same test was 14.50 and the standard deviation was 1.67. The results show 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.

Table 8: Descriptive Statistics of the Vocabulary and Grammar Posttest

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Language Posttest	Control	20	4.1750	.81556	.18236
	Experimental	19	17.6316	1.83214	.42032
	Control	20	16.1000	1.61897	.36201

The mean score for the participatory group was 17.63 on a thirty-point scale and the standard deviation was 1.83, as shown in Table 8. Moreover, the mean score of the control group on the same test was 16.10 and the standard deviation was 1.61. The results show 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 less heterogeneous than the participatory group. In order to run a further inferential analysis for the sake of hypothesis testing, a normality test was run to test the normality of language pretest and posttest score distributions. The results are shown below:

Table 9: Test of Normality for the Vocabulary and Grammar Test Scores

	Group	Kolmogorov-Smirnova			Shapiro-Wilk		
		Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Language Pretest	Experimental	.208	19	.030	.881	19	.022
	Control	.182	20	.080	.899	20	.040

To test the normality of the language test scores for the experimental and control groups, for both sets of scores the Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test of was conducted. As Table 9 suggests, the null hypothesis, which assumes the Normality homogeneity of variance and normal distribution of the sample, could be rejected for participatory group pretest scores (ZK-S =.20, p-value=.03), whereas it was accepted for the control group pretest scores (ZK-S =.18, p-value=.08).

Table 10: Test of Normality for the Vocabulary and Grammar Posttest Scores

	Group	Kolmogorov-Smirnova			Shapiro-Wilk		
		Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Language Posttest	Experimental	.157	19	.200*	.964	19	.659
	Control	.175	20	.111	.926	20	.129

According to Table 10, the null hypothesis for the normality of the scores can be accepted for participatory group posttest (ZK-S =.15, p-value=.20) and control group's posttest scores (ZK-S =.17, p-value=.11). Therefore, a parametric test had to be used to test the hypothesis. Table 11 compares language pretest scores of the two groups.

Table 11: Independent Samples t-test for the Comparison of the Vocabulary and Grammar Pretest Scores

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means							
		F	Sig.	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Difference	Error	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
										Lower	Upper
Language Pretest	Equal variances assumed	.257	.615	1.474	37	.149	.76316	.51787		-.2861	1.812
	Equal variances not assumed			1.476	36.98	.148	.76316	.51692		-.2842	1.810

As shown in table 11, the results ( $t= 1.47$ ,  $p= .14$ ) indicate that there was no significant difference between the two groups with regard to their pretest scores. In other words, the two groups were similar before the intervention in terms of their grammar and vocabulary knowledge.

Table 12: Independent Samples t-test for Vocabulary and Grammar Test Scores

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means							
		F	Sig.	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Difference	Error	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
										Lower	Upper
Language Posttest	Equal variances assumed	.394	.534	2.770	37	.009	1.53158	.55293		.41123	2.65193
	Equal variances not assumed			2.761	35.896	.009	1.53158	.55473		.40643	2.65673

Table 12 shows that there was a significant difference between the two groups with regard to the language posttest scores. According to the table, it can be argued that the participatory group outperformed the control group on language posttest. Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected. Further analysis compared the pretest and posttest scores for each group, the results of which are shown below.

Table 13: Paired-samples t-test for Vocabulary and Grammar Pretest And Posttest for the Experimental and Control Groups

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

According to Table 13, the results show that the participatory approach made significant progress ( $t= 2.79$ ,  $p= .01$ ) in their grammar and vocabulary knowledge-based scores of the test developed for the textbook

they have covered in their course. The grammar and vocabulary knowledge of the control group, however, did not significantly improve considering the scores of the language posttest ( $t= 1.27$ ,  $p= .21$ ). The results, hence, indicate the fourth hypothesis, stating that “Other language components are not positively influenced through the implementation of Participatory Approach’ was rejected. In other words, it has been proved that the participatory approach had a positive effect on the participants’ improvement in both vocabulary and grammar knowledge.

#### *4.3. Results Related to Research Question Three*

The third research question posed above was concerned with the teachers’ attitude towards implementing the participatory approach that is “What are the effects of applying Participatory Approach on learning English at intermediate level from the teachers’ perspective? In order to find answers to this research question, the qualitative data from the interview the visiting teachers were analyzed. The interpretation of data related to each research question is presented in this section. As described in chapter three regarding the sixth research question, an interview was conducted to explore the attitudes and reactions of the teachers who observed the participatory class. This interview consisted of six items and results are presented below according to each item included in the interview.

*What is your idea about the group activities the participants have had during this course?*

All teachers who were asked to have regular visits of the participatory approach group activities announced that they found the group activities, collaborative tasks, and role-plays very useful in encouraging the students to have more participation in classroom activities. They added that teachers do not usually include such group tasks in their regular classes, and they find the students usually reluctant to take part in such activities. After having observed the class activities for a few sessions, most of them came to the conclusion that such participatory activities can have innumerable benefits both for the learners and for the teachers, and they agreed that they would try to implement some of those activities in their future classes.

*What do you think of the ways students’ errors are dealt with? What do you think of the feedback the students received from the teacher and from other students?*

Three out of five teachers had a favorable attitude towards correcting students’ errors directly as they believed the procedure often leads to their understanding of the source of errors and correcting themselves, though there was a case where they repeated the errors again while talking to others. Two other teachers were of the opinion that more indirect ways of correcting students’ error would be more effective and less threatening to students’ face. All five teachers, however, unanimously agreed that in writing exercises the participatory approach teacher’s correction of students’ errors in writing often bore good results in their writing. They mentioned that through dialogic interaction between the teacher and students and between students and students, the learners were given the chance to understand both the grammatical points and the vocabulary use better while participating in speaking activities and while completing writing assignments

*What is your idea about the exploratory nature of participatory approach? What types of instructions do you think the students should receive in such classes?*

All teachers who observed the participatory classroom activities were of the opinion that the group activities and collaborative tasks in which the learners took part often lead to increased motivation among learners as they would often want to continue the same activities longer and longer, and they would never get bored of getting involved such activities. Two of the teachers, however, added that because of the novelty of the tasks for the students, some of them sometimes felt confused as to what to do or how to complete a task. The teachers believed that students needed more orientation and more preparatory sessions before getting involved in such group activities, which they said would definitely result in better achievement among the students.

*What areas of language do you think are more important that need be more emphasized in such classes?*

The ideas expressed by the teachers were not much different from those expressed by the students. Much the same way like the students, the visiting teachers also believed that special vocabulary chunks, collocations, everyday conversational expressions, and useful phrases and idioms should be emphasized in such classes. They further added that pronunciation, intonation, more frequently encountered grammatical points and structures should receive more attention. Two of the teachers, however, were of the opinion that it was more important to encourage the students to develop the ability to express their ideas more fluently that emphasizing on points of pronunciation or intonation. To them, more energy and effort should be devoted to communication skills rather than spending time on details of pronunciation or detailed grammar points.

*What do you think of the outcome of such a course for the students?*

All the teachers who had regular observations of the participatory approach classroom activities unanimously agreed that the results of the group activities were incredible. They mentioned that in spite of some problems that the activities sometimes created both for the learners and for the teacher, the results were extremely satisfactory as they could easily notice the students' satisfaction of participating in such group tasks. They added that no matter what the result of the posttest would be, the encouragement among the students to participate in classroom activities and their involvement in the negotiation of meaning with the teacher and with other students was beneficial for the learners beyond measure. This participation of the students would also lead to more motivation for the teacher to spend more time and energy for such activities.

Overall, it can be concluded from the results of the interview that almost all of the five visiting teachers had favorable opinions about the variety of the group activities, the learners' interactions with the teacher and their classmates and particularly, the participation of the students in group activities. There was overall consensus over the effectiveness of the participatory approach on encouraging interactions among the students, sharing their ideas and taking initiatives in conversational activities. This positive attitude by the teachers made good sense as they were well aware of the theoretical underpinnings of the participatory approach and collaborative tasks, and thus could better realize the positive outcome of the activities better than the students. This can also account for the results achieved on the IELTS posttest, based on which the participant in the participatory group outperformed the control group. The results are consistent with principles of Swain's (1985, 2000) 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.

## **5. Discussion**

The current study set out to investigate the impact of the participatory approach on the language proficiency of EFL learners. Moreover, the study aimed at probing the effect of participatory approach on learning grammar and vocabulary. Additionally, the study sought to explore the attitudes of teachers related to applying participatory approach on learning English. As it has been shown above, although both the participatory approach and the conventional approach had positive effects on the participants performances on the IELTS posttest in comparison with their scores on the IELTS pretest, the findings in this study seem to suggest that the implementation of the participatory approach and collaborative activities did not 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 (e.g. Kuiken & Vedder, 2002; Nassaji & Tian, 2010; Swain & Lapkin, 2001). A number of reasons may account for this lack of a significant difference between the experimental group and the control group.

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), 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. Analyses of the written transcriptions of learners' interaction showed that although there were interactions among learners, there were many cases where these interactions were brief and limited. Thus, although the learners were fairly successful in completing the tasks during the interaction, the interactions may not have been rich enough to lead to the internalization and acquisition of the target forms. The most important reason seems to be related to the limited period of practice with the participatory approach. If there had been a longer period of practice with the approach, the researcher would probably have achieved more promising results for collaborative activities as compared with individual conventional activities.

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 to improve 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 to complete the test. It seems that the learners might have needed longer introductory sessions. Another reason could be related to the learners' limited skills of how to collaborate effectively with peers. Previous research has shown that the effectiveness of learner collaboration depends on learners' ability to work and solve language-related problems collaboratively. Berg (1999), for example, found that training learners prior to collaborative activities made a substantial difference in the effectiveness of collaborative work in promoting scaffolding and learning. In our study, before each task, we made efforts so that learners had adequate direction and instruction about how to complete the tasks. The participant, however, did not go through a training session. It might be more effective, as suggested by Nassaji & Tian (2010) if learners are taught first how to collaborate or before implementing the collaborative task. This can be done in different ways, such as by showing students video-tapes of learners working collaboratively on similar tasks (Swain & Lapkin, 2001), explaining to and discussing with the learners how to participate in collaborative tasks and collectively solve their problems in task completion, or the teacher's going through a collaborative session together with students. There are other factors that can influence the nature of interaction such as the composition of the group (Bennett & Cass, 1988), participants' shared goals and assumptions, learners' strategies, and their cognitive and developmental readiness (Nassaji & Cumming, 2000; Leaser, 2004). 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.

## 6. Conclusion

Findings of the present research have certain implications for pedagogy. Positive effects of collaborative activities on improving speaking skill and acquisition of vocabulary and grammar found in the present study lend support to the use of this technique in designing L2 reading materials. The application of this method, however, needs more support as to its effectiveness by future research in the same area. Collaborative classroom activities that may encourage interactions among learners, on the one hand, and improve knowledge of language components, on the other, have recently received special attention among language scholars and researchers. The present study seem to prepare some factual ground for the implementation of the principle of the participatory approach and collaborative tasks in L2 classroom activities.

The results in the present research, however, have pointed to the fact that the participatory approach and collaborative activities have led to an improvement in participants IELTS scores on the posttest as compared with the results on the IELTS pretest. The approach has also had a positive effect on improving the language achievement of the participants as measured by vocabulary and grammar tests. All in all, all these findings appear to suggest to the potential positive effects of the participatory and collaborative activities. These activities can not only encourage more classroom interactions among EFL learners, but they can also help them improve at least some oral language skills and their knowledge of other components such as grammar and vocabulary. The findings of this study might provide a useful tool for language instructors and educators in their selection of effective classroom activities. Furthermore, the finding that collaborative tasks were more effective for task completion exercises than conventional individual tasks, is an encouraging finding for instructors and researchers who are eager to know in which ways instructional programs might foster more negotiation among L2 learners.

Furthermore, the results of the current study might provide useful insights for the developers of instructional materials and syllabus designers in their selection of effective word-focused tasks in EFL materials. It can hardly be denied that an adequate and sufficient vocabulary knowledge leads to good comprehension and production. Thus, given the importance of vocabulary and grammar in EFL, any word-focused task that helps learners to develop their vocabulary knowledge would certainly be beneficial. And finally, this study could possibly lay the groundwork for a great deal of research to touch on the effect of different collaborative tasks on various components of language rather than grammar and vocabulary knowledge. Considering the results of the study and the previous studies done on participatory approach to English language teaching, a number of suggestions can be offered. First, with regard to time limitation in this study, it is suggested that the same study be replicated in a context in which the learners undergo a longer intervention. Second, participatory approach may be researched with regard to different learner variables – risk-taking, self-regulation, willingness to communicate, motivation, etc. – in order to see if such variables convey any significant effect on its practical outcomes. Third, participatory approach may be implemented with regard to different approaches and theoretical frameworks such as Freirean framework, socio-cultural theory and so on which results in different methodological variations. Accordingly, it may be expected that the results and also the learners' or teachers' attitudes to these methods vary and thus, enrich our understanding of the dynamics of teaching EFL using participatory approach.

## References

- Abadikhah, S., & Shahriyarpour, A. (2012). The role of output, input enhancement and collaborative output in the acquisition of English passive forms. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 3 (4), 667-676.
- Barnes, D., & Todd, F. (1977). *Communication and learning in small groups*. Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Bejarano, Y. (1987). A cooperative small-group methodology in the language classroom. *TESOL Quarterly*, 21 (3), 483-501.
- Bennett, N., & Cass, A. (1988). The effects of group composition on group interactive processes and pupil understanding. *British Educational Research Journal*, 15, 19-32.
- Berg, E.C. (1999). The effects of trained peer response on ESL students' revision types and writing quality. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 8, 215-41
- Bruffee, K. A. (1999). *Collaborative learning: Higher education. Interdependence and the Authority of Knowledge*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.



- Jabbarpoor, S., & Tajeddin, Z. (2013). Enhanced input, individual output, and Collaborative output; Effects on the acquisition of the English subjunctive mood. *Revista signos. Estudios De Lingüística*, 46(82), 213-235.
- Johnson, R. T., & Johnson, D. W. (1986). Cooperative learning in the science classroom. *Science and Children*, 24(1), 31-32.
- Kowal, M., & Swain, M. (1994). Using collaborative language production tasks to promote students' language awareness. *Language Awareness*, 3, 73-93.
- Kuiken, F., & Vedder, I. (2002). The effect of interaction in acquiring the grammar of a second language. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 37, 343-58.
- Leeser, M. J. (2004). Learner proficiency and focus on form during collaborative dialogue. *Language Teaching Research*, 8(1), 55-81.
- McGroarty, M. (1989). Cooperative learning and second language acquisition. In D.D. Holt (Ed.), *Cooperative learning: A response to linguistic and cultural diversity* (pp. 19-46). McHenry, IL: Center for Applied Linguistics and Delta Systems.
- Nabei, T. (1996). Dictogloss: Is it an effective language learning task? *Working Papers in Educational Linguistics*, 12, 59-74.
- Nassaji, H., & Cumming, A. (2000). What's in a ZPD? A case study of a young ESL student and teacher interacting through dialogue journals. *Language Teaching Research*, 4, 95-121.
- Nassaji, H., & Tian, J. (2010). Collaborative and individual output tasks and their effects on learning English phrasal verbs. *Language Teaching Research*, 14(4) 397-41.
- Rymes, B. (1997). Second Language Socialization: A new approach to second language acquisition research. *Journal of Intensive English Studies*, 11(1), 143-155
- Storch, N. (1997). A classroom-based study: Insights from a collaborative text reconstruction task. *ELT Journal*, 54(4), 291-307.
- Storch, N. (2005). Collaborative writing: product, process, and students' reflections. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 14, 153-73.
- Storch, N. (2007). Investigating the merits of pair work on a text editing task in ESL classes. *Language Teaching Research*, 2, 143-59.
- Swain, M., & Lapkin, S. (2001). Focus on form through collaborative dialogue: Exploring task effects. In M. Bygate, P. Skehan, & M. Swain (Eds.), *Researching pedagogic tasks: Second language learning, teaching and testing* (pp.99-118). Harlow: Pearson Education.
- Swain, M., & Lapkin, S. (2002). Talking it through: Two French immersion learners' response to reformulation. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 37, 285-304.
- Totten, S., Sills, T., Digby, A., & Russ, P. (1991). *Cooperative learning: A guide to research*. New York: Garland