Peer Assisted Learning in Iranian Guidance Schools, and the Students' Grammar and Vocabulary Achievement

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Abstract
The present study was conducted to examine the nature of Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) in Iranian Guidance schools and its effects on the students' grammar and vocabulary learning. To this end, 60 Iranian guidance school students were chosen. These students were already classified and put in groups of 30 students by the school board. The researcher taught both classes. He considered one class as an experimental group and the other as a control one. Both groups were taught three lessons of the Iranian guidance school book called "Right Path to English". Of course, the experimental group had the chance of experiencing PAL scheme, while the comparison group continued the conventional way of their language learning. To meet the requirements of the PAL scheme and handle the project successfully, the teacher appointed some PAL leaders from the class. These leaders were the students who had proved to qualify for doing the group leading job as well as solving the students' educational problems. After six sessions of treatment, which lasted for about two months, the two groups were post tested through a multiple choice item test. The results demonstrated that the experimental group outperformed the control group in terms of both vocabulary and grammar achievements. Finally, it was concluded that Peer Assisted Learning can lead to higher vocabulary and grammar learning in comparison to the conventional methods.
Keywords: Cooperative learning, Peer Assisted Learning, peer leader, peer modeling, guidance school, positive interdependence, individual accountability

Background and Purpose

Language learning has concerned people of different positions and occupations for a long time. The fact that learning English is gaining an increasing significance and attention has motivated many experts to try to devise new methods and come up with new ideas for transferring this valuable knowledge to those who need it. A great number of methodologists and language teaching experts have suggested new methods and techniques and implemented them in different classes. Although each method has had a relative degree of success and affected this field for a while, both teachers and experts still have a long way to go. Obviously the trial and error for offering a convincing method has lasted long and language classes in different parts of the world have experienced various methods which have been modified or rejected after a certain period. This evolutionary process has continued to this day and still seems to have much to get to a desirable destination.

Among these efforts, some scholars like Slavin and Cooper (1999) have suggested cooperative methods to language learning and described them as those which 'enhance academic, cognitive and social standards'. Baloche (1998) asserts that unlike most language teaching proposals, CLL has been extensively researched and evaluated and research findings are generally supportive (cited in Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

Cooperative language learning method has taken different forms and is known in different versions. Peer Assisted Learning (PAL, henceforth) which is under the study in this research, can be considered as a cooperative method with its unique features. The advocates of Peer Assisted Learning have suggested that some students have got a lot to teach their fellow students or their so-called peers. "Compared to lecturers, successful upper-level students are better equipped to help novice students to become expert students" (Martin & Arendal, 1993).

It might be so, because peers usually share the same experiences and have a better understanding of each other's needs and feelings.They have probably passed the same stages and had similar difficulties in language learning. These experts also believe that the learners will acquire knowledge through active interaction with their peers.Topping and Ehly (1998) have considered this fact by defining Peer Assisted Learning as "the acquisition of knowledge and skill through active helping and supporting among status equals or matched companions".

Those who have used this method in their classes generally believe that through the administration of PAL scheme, we will not have the passive condition that usually dominates our language classes and often has pernicious effects on the students' learning. McDonell (1992) verifies this claim by stating that a 'cooperative classroom is well-suited for second language learners as it enables them to communicate, collaborate, problem-solve, and think critically'.

Richard M. Felder (1994) states that cooperatively taught students tend to exhibit higher academic achievement, greater persistence through graduation…lower levels of anxiety and stress. Then language learning

through PAL, as a cooperative method, will also help the students do away with the stress and confusion that mostly exists in language classes; this is because the students feel free to ask questions whenever they think they need to. This friendly condition is expected to eliminate most of the class anxiety that is created as a result of teacher-student relation or the so called teacher centeredness.

Johnson and Johnson (1989) claim that cooperative learning experiences promote more positive attitudes toward learning and instruction than other teaching methodologies. Then the fact that the students see their fellow students act much better than themselves, and are leading the students and controlling the group activities like a teacher, suggests that language learning is not the impossible task that they have in mind .This way the students will try hard and always wait for the appropriate time to act like their leaders. In other words, Peer Assisted Learning is highly expected to create a positive attitude toward learning among the students.

And the last but not the least, Malcolm Swan(2005) states that the teacher's role in our model is to remove the 'fear of failure' by welcoming mistakes as learning opportunities rather than problems to avoid. This way Peer Assisted Learning gives the students the chance to feel more comfortable to express themselves, even if they think they might make mistakes. They will also feel more courageous to demonstrate their knowledge and try to communicate with others. Of course one chief reason for this fact is the teachers' attitude toward the students' mistakes.

By carrying out this study, the researcher hopes that cooperative language learning and particularly Peer Assisted Learning can receive more attention and enjoy more popularity among EFL teachers at all grade levels, and English classes in Iran can actually help their students gain communicative competence and experience the joy of language learning in some stress free classes.

Participants

To accomplish the objectives of this research study, 60 male guidance school students of one school in a city in the suburb of Tehran, the capital city of Iran, were selected.These students were studying in two classes taught by the researcher. The participants were approximately at the age of 13, andthey were studying in grade three at the time the data were collected. All the students had at least experienced two years of language learning in the Iranian system of education.

Results

As mentioned before, the researcher tried to answer the following two questions in the study.

1. Does language learning through PAL scheme affect the grammar achievement of Iranian guidance school students?

To answer this question an experimentwas carried out. Before explaining the results of the experiment it was necessary to make sure that the experimental and control groups were homogeneous at the start of the study. To do so, a pretest composed of grammar (20 items) and vocabulary (20 items) was administered. As it can be seen in Table 1 the mean of the groups are very close.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Grammar Pretest

Group		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Grammar pretest	control	30	14.8000	2.73420	.49919
	Experimental	30	14.5000	3.58878	.65522

The results were further analyzed through an independent sample t-test. The results indicate that the T-observed is not significant (t (1, 58) = .364, P >.71).That is to say that the difference between the two groups is not statistically significant (Table 2). It follows that the two groups are homogeneous at the outset of the study.

Table 2: Independent Sample T-Test for Grammar Pretest

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	sig.	t	f	ig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std.Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Grammar pretest	Equal variances assumed	.132	292	364	8	717	.30000	.82371	-1.34884	1.94884
	Equal variances not assumed			364	4.182	717	.30000	.82371	-1.35132	1.95132

Since the groups are homogeneous, any difference observed in terms of the post-test results can be attributed to the treatment.

To entertain the hypothesis above, the post-test scores were analyzed through an independent sample t-

test. As the Table 3 shows the t-observed is significant (t (1,58) = 2.27 ,P <.02). The interpretation is that there is significant difference between the two groups. It is safe to claim that the treatment has been effective.

Table 3: Independent Sample T-Test for Grammar Posttest

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
									95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		sig.	t	df	ig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper	
Grammar posttest	Equal variances assumed	346	559	-2.275	8	027	-1.70000	.74713	-3.19554	-.20446
	Equal variances not assumed			-2.275	3.053	027	-1.70000	.74713	-3.19851	-.20149

As it can be seen in Table 4 below, the mean of the experimental group is 1.7 points higher than that of the control group. Hence, the conclusion is that the treatment in the experimental group has been successful.

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics for Grammar posttest

Group		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Grammar posttest	control	30	12.9667	3.30604	.60360
	Experimental	30	14.6667	2.41166	.44031

2. Does language learning through PAL scheme affect vocabulary learning of Iranian guidance school students?

To answer this question, an experiment was carried out. As mentioned before,a pretest composed of grammar (20 items) and vocabulary (20 items) was administered to make sure about the homogeneity of the groups. As it can be seen in Table 5 the mean of the groups are very close.

Table 5: Descriptive Statistics for Vocabulary Pretest

Group		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Vocabulary pretest control		30	17.2333	2.92060	.53323
	Experimental	30	17.0333	3.64345	.66520

The results were further analyzed through independent sample t-test. The results indicate that the T-observed is not significant (t (1,58)= .235,P >.81).That is to say that the difference between the two groups is not statistically significant (Table 6). It follows that the two groupsare homogeneous at the outset of the study.

Table 6: Independent Sample T-Test for Vocabulary Pretest

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
									95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		sig.	f		ig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std.Error Difference	Lower	Upper	
vocab pretest	Equal variances assumed	202	655	235	8	815	.20000	.85254	-1.50654	1.90654
	Equal variances not assumed			235	5.378	815	.20000	.85254	-1.50826	1.90826

Since the groups are homogeneous, any difference observed in terms of the post-test results can be attributed to the treatment.

To entertain the hypothesis above, the post test scores were analyzed through independent sample t-test. As the Table 7 shows the t-observed is significant (t (1,58) = 2.26 ,P <.02). The interpretation is that there is significant difference between the two groups. It is safe to claim that the treatment has been effective.

Table 7: Independent Sample T-Test for vocabulary Posttest

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
			sig.	t	f	sig.(2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Vocab posttest	Equal variances assumed	1.812	001	-2.264	8	027	-1.30000	.57419	-2.44936	-.15064
	Equal variances not assumed			-2.264	1.078	029	-1.30000	.57419	-2.45953	-.14047

As it can be seen in Table 8 below, the mean of the experimental group is 1.3 points higher than that of the control group. Hence, the conclusion is that the treatment in the experimental group has been successful.

Table 8: Descriptive Statistics for Vocabulary Posttest

Group		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Vocabulary posttest	control	30	17.1333	2.84948	.52024
	Experimental	30	18.4333	1.33089	.24299

In order to make sure that the tests used for the purpose of this study are reliable, the results were analyzed through an internal consistency test. The results show that both pretest and posttest are acceptably reliable: α = .88 for the pretest and α= .77 for the posttest.

Discussion

As the analysis of the study demonstrated, the vocabulary and grammar scores of the experimental group were not significant in comparison with the achievement of the control group in the pretest. Then the researcher made sure that the participants in both groups met the factor of homogeneity.

Considering subsequent findings, it could be concluded that the vocabulary and grammar achievement of the experimental group in the post-test is significantly higher than the average achievement of the control group. As stated earlier, the point is that the experimental group received PAL treatment, while the control group was exposed to the common conventional method which is usually used in Iranian language classes as well as many other EFL settings. This very matter could be put forward as a reason for the better performance of the experimental group on the post-test.

In this study, PAL scheme which is considered as a type of cooperative method turned out to cause more gains in vocabulary and grammar achievement in comparison with the conventional methods used in most language classes. This finding is specifically in line with what Slavin (1994) has found in his study regarding the cooperative language learning while he reported a median effect size of .32 for 52 studies of cooperative learning treatments that lasted for more than 4 weeks.

Moreover, Liang(2000) in his thesis about cooperative learning in EFL teaching has found that the experimental group gained significantly on all of the five grading criteria (appropriateness, vocabulary, grammar, intelligibility, and fluency) while the control group only gained significantly on the items of grammar and fluency.

Douglas Fuchs and Lynn S. Fuchs (2005) in their 15-week study called Peer Assisted Learning strategies also report that PALS students outperformed No-PALS ones and showed positive reactions to the treatment.

The results of the study are also in line with the findings of some other researchers and scholars who believe that academic achievements of students have been found to be enhanced by the use of cooperative learning methods (Lampe, Rooze & Tallent-Runnels, 1998; Johnson & Johnson, 1989; Slavin, 1990, 1991; Webb, 1989).

Hui-Chuan (2006) has used a cooperative method for teaching grammar and stated that the cooperative learners on average demonstrated higher grammar achievement than the whole-class learners.
Weidner and Popp et al. (2007) and Tolsgaard et al. (2007) reported that peer leaders were effective in teaching their peers.

Many other scholars and researchers have employed cooperative learning methods for teaching grammar and vocabulary to their students. For exampleGömleksiz's (2007) found that cooperative learningsignificantly enhanced students' vocabulary knowledge and grammar use as compared with conventional

instruction,Huiping Ning (2010) came with contrasting findings though.

Based on the above-presented facts it could be claimed that the different gains of the experimental and comparison groups were due to the fact that the participants in the experimental group received PAL scheme, while the participants of the control group were taught by the past conventional methods. This way, PAL could be introduced as a better alternative to the common tradition of vocabulary and grammar teaching in language classes.

Although there have been a lot of research studies regarding the comparative examination of the effect of Peer Assisted Learning on vocabulary and grammar learning, the present study could be considered as an additional support for PAL scheme in comparison with conventional methods in teaching vocabulary and grammar.

Conclusion

This study was to examine the effect of Peer Assisted Learning onIranian guidance school students and their vocabulary and grammar achievement. Considering the review of the literature and what happens in real language classes, contradictory findings and ideas were observed.

In order to test these null hypotheses, 60 participants from one of the Iranian guidance schools were studied. Based on their school board classification in the form of two classes, these participants were put into experimentaland control groups. A pretest was given to both groups to observe their homogeneity level. The results indicated that the T-observed was not significant.

While the participants of the control group were exposed to the common conventional methods, the students of the experimental group received both grammar and vocabulary of the three lessons through PAL scheme. Afterwards, the participants were post-tested through another grammar and vocabulary test to examine their achievements after thetreatment.

AT-test was employed to compare the vocabulary and grammar achievement of the experimental and control groups. By doing so, the null hypotheses of the study were rejected because the experimental group significantly outperformed the control group in the above-mentioned areas. To confirm this claim, the post-test scores of both grammar and vocabulary parts were analyzed through an independent sample t-test.

The first null hypothesis was rejected because in grammar section it turned out that the t-observed was significant (t (1, 58) = 2.27, P <.02). The interpretation is that there is significant difference between the two groups. It is safe to claim that the treatment has been effective.

The second null hypothesis was also rejected because the post-test scores of the vocabulary section were analyzed through an independent sample t-test and the t-observed was significant (t (1, 58) = 2.26, P <.02). The interpretation is that there is significant difference between the two groups. It is safe to claim that the treatment has been effective.

The outcome of the present study can be interpreted in the light of whatRust and Wallace (1994) state. They believe that 'first year students are more likely to be actively engaged in their learning in student facilitated sessions than in traditional lectures'.

Then it is totally concluded that as well as many other parts of the world, (PAL) will be of great help to the Iranian guidance school students' vocabulary and grammar achievement and it could be offered to the language teachers and especially those who are teaching English in EFL settings and their students are deprived of appropriate language exposure.

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