# The Impact of Pair Work on EFL Learners' Motivation[1]

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## Abstract

The use of pair work activities has been advocated by communicative approaches to foreign language pedagogy for the past forty years. However, there is very little evidence to suggest whether or not these activities promote learners' motivation. This study aimed to investigate the effect of pair-work on EFL learners' motivation. Moreover, it reports two teachers' ideas concerning this. The study was carried out in a language institute in Tehran, Iran. A Pair-work Oriented (PO) group and an Individual Oriented (IO) group were selected for teacher interviews, class observations, and students' motivation questionnaire. An independent samples *t*-test and descriptive statistics were employed via SPSS version 18. The results of the observations followed by some extracts of the teachers' interview were subjectively analyzed. The conclusion indicates that the class in which the teacher included a greater amount of pair-work improved the students' motivation more.

## Resumen

El uso de actividades de trabajo en parejas ha sido promovido durante los últimos cuarenta años por los enfoques comunicativos a la pedagogía de lenguas extranjeras. Sin embargo, existe muy poca evidencia para sugerir que si estas actividades promueven o no la motivación. Este estudio pretende investigar el efecto del trabajo en parejas sobre la motivación de los estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera. Aún mas, presenta las ideas de dos profesores concernientes a este tema. Este estudio se desarrolló en un instituto de idiomas en Teherán, Irán. Un grupo con orientación de trabajo en parejas y otro orientada sobre trabajo individual fueron seleccionados para entrevistas con los maestros, observaciones de clases y un cuestionario sobre la motivación de los estudiantes. Se utilizaron, vía SPSS versión 18, estadísticas descriptivas y con muestras independientes de t-test. Se analizaron subjetivamente los resultados de las observaciones seguidos de algunos extractos de las entrevistas con los profesores. La conclusión indica que la clase en la cual el profesor incluyó una mucho mayor cantidad de trabajo en parejas incrementó más la motivación de los estudiantes.

## Introduction

The use of pair work and studying its outcomes have been a controversial issue for many teachers and researchers for the past two decades or so (Baleghizadeh, 2007, 2010; McDonough, 2004; Shimatani, 1986; Storch, 2001). Recent communicative approaches encourage the use of pair or group work; however, to date there have been very few studies, if any, that have investigated the impact of pair work on EFL students' motivation. This study examines pair work from a new perspective in that it not only focuses on the students' motivation but also investigates the teachers' attitude toward accepting or rejecting pair work in EFL classes. Reviewing the related literature the domain of pair work and motivation shows that there have been many studies which have examined each separately. However, there have been few attempts to link these two variables. A brief review of the literature related to them will be presented below.

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## Literature Review

The use of pair and small group work has preoccupied teachers' minds for quite a long time, particularly when it comes to how they should be implemented. Shimatani (1986) argues that L2 teachers should admit the fact that the language classroom is an artificial setting for language learning. To increase the effect of small group activity in such a context, to decrease tension, and to control students' affective filter, Shimatani (1986) provided the following guidelines for the successful use of small group work in L2 classes:

- First, the teacher should behave as a consultant by supporting, praising, and encouraging group members.
- Second, the necessity of leadership should be recognized. A ~~great~~ person who can both skillfully and expressively control the group is a key to lower the tension level.
- Third is the fact that the teacher should not assign routine tasks for pairs to do in order to engage them more.

Likewise, Peacock (1997) researched the effect of authentic materials on EFL learners' motivation. The teachers in this study stated that they define motivation as adopted learner interest, persistence, attention, action, and enjoyment. Two beginner-level EFL classes participated in the study, and both classes used authentic materials one day and non-authentic materials the next day alternately. The results showed that although the learners found authentic materials more motivating than artificial ones, they reported that they were less interesting. This rather surprising finding, as concluded by Peacock (1997), suggests that "learners were motivated by authentic materials, but not because they were more interesting" (p. 152).

Rubrecht (2004) in his doctoral dissertation tried to focus on the concept of motivation in Eastern societies. This could be connected to our concern of PO versus IO setting with a focus on motivation. Since the previous studies related to the motivation of language learners were conducted mostly in the West, they were often based on Western assumptions, one of which is that the learner was an individualist in that case. Eastern cultures are based on collectivistic principles where the progress of the individual is often not as important as the progress of the group. Results indicated that Japanese high school seniors were overall instrumentally motivated because the closest goal at hand was their success in examination.  This conclusion is also made by Sayadian and Lashkarian (2010) in the Iranian context. Although these students often had other long-term goals for language learning, they were unable to concentrate on them because of the importance of the examinations. Generally speaking, the students became individualistic in their approach to language learning and would seek ability to pass the examinations, thereby becoming competitive with their classmates. Yet, they would not lose their cooperative stance toward others and would maintain their friendships despite the competition they encountered. Thus, the concept of collectivism as a part of the foundation of Japanese society comparing the concept of individualism in Western countries was discussed by Rubrecht (2004) in the following:

> *Western views about human nature see people first as being composed of internal attributes and second as behaving in terms of those attributes. This view of acting and reacting based on such internal attributes suggests that people will consider their own feelings and pursue their own goals prior to considering the feelings and goals of others. This may not be the case in non-Western contexts where the individual often defines and feel that their group is*

*more important than their individual identity; it is conceivable that whatever motivations Japanese learners may have toward learning English may be filtered through their collectivistic perspective. As a result, they may not approach their language learning in ways similar to individualistic Westerners. (p. 81)*

The present study also considers the aforementioned approved facts by having an Eastern society, such as Iran, as the setting of the research and considering the concept of collectivism by putting students in pairs.

Baleghizadeh (2007) also put an emphasis on ignoring individualism with a focus on the interaction hypothesis. He discussed some key concepts in ELT considering the interaction hypothesis. Based on this hypothesis (see Long, 1983), language acquisition greatly benefits from interaction and negotiation of meaning. These benefits happen with interlocutors' attempt to overcome problems in conveying their meaning, resulting in both additional input and useful feedback on the learners' own production.

Following his strong belief in the positive effect of pair work in EFL settings, Baleghizadeh (2010) reported on a study in the Iranian adult learners' context. The participants of the experimental group were asked to complete a word-building task in their pairs whereas the participants in the comparison group did the same task individually. Results showed that the experimental group outperformed the comparison group in terms of their scores on the given task. Baleghizadeh (2010) offers the following tips for a more favorable implementation of pair work:

1. Explain to students what pair-work is. Students should know the "why" and "how" of doing an activity in pairs or group.
2. Structure the pair-work as carefully as you can. Usually in pairs, one should take control of the activity and the other one has another role. Students should clearly know what their roles are.
3. Monitor the pairs. Teachers should monitor the pairs carefully, paying more attention to less proficient pairs more than the other ones. In elementary levels, students may use their L1 (first language), so it is necessary to "make sure that they use the target language and offer help when needed".
4. Set a time-limit and have something planned for those who finish earlier. The time-limit makes students stick to important points as much as possible. Given the fact that there are always fast students who finish the activity sooner than the others, it is suggested that teachers plan extra work for them.
5. Get the pairs to report to their classmates. Reporting to class motivates the students and helps them practice the target language. (adapted from p. 406)

In the same vein, McDonough (2004) stated that the use of pair and small group activities in L2 classrooms is supported both theoretically and pedagogically. The study was carried out in the Thai EFL context, trying to investigate whether the learners in pairs and small groups showed improved production of the target forms; the researcher also explored the learners' and practitioners' perception about using pair-work and small-group activities. The results indicated that the participants who had done the activity in pairs with more participation demonstrated improved production of the target forms.

Now, what is the role of emotions, motivation, and affective filters in the language learning process? To respond to this fundamental question, Imai (2007) explored the effect of group functioning and collaborative learning with two groups of six Japanese

EFL students. In doing so, the researcher underscored the participants' emotions holistically via their verbal communication over the semester. The researcher recognized interpersonal, functional, and developmental aspects of emotions and considered how such a perspective informed understanding learning as knowledge co-construction. The researcher found that emotions in any form (such as appraisal by peers and teachers) could become a psychological resource to mediate development when learning was embedded in interpersonal context.

Lin (2010) similarly argued that many studies have shown that cooperative learning (CL) has great benefits for the enhancement of students' motivation and the promotion of their social interactions. Teachers might be challenged in their aims to form effective CL groups or pairs. To have an effective CL group, which seems to be more involving and engaging, a number of points should be considered such as positive interdependence, face-to--face interaction, individual accountability, interpersonal and small-group social skills, and the like (Johnson & Johnson, 1990).

Following Lin's (2010) claim, the present researchers tried to find evidence in the literature to see which studies have been carried out with the main focus on cooperative learning. With an exact focus on the concept of communicative competence, following the theories discussed in Brown (2007) and Canale and Swain (1980), studies such as Cuseo (1992), Ladson (2003), Muller and Fleming (2001), and Savignon and Wang (2003) highlighted the practical use of cooperative learning and its importance in ESL/EFL context. Similarly, Johnson and Johnson (1990, 1992, 2000) studied cooperative learning (focusing on group work and its effect on learning) and developed their studies through the years.

Meanwhile, Sachs, Candlin, and Rose (2003) conducted a study in which they incorporated an alternative approach of teaching English which was against the traditional teacher-fronted style of teaching English in Hong Kong secondary classrooms. In this approach, learners were involved in cooperative language learning tasks, and each learner in a group was given a specific role to play in meeting the demands of the task collaboratively. Their study demonstrated that learners could do much better if they were given the right learning tools or tasks within a supportive language environment.

Given the existing gap in the literature about the effect of pair work on learners' motivation, this study was conducted to explore this issue. By focusing on pair work tasks in classes and asking the teachers' and learners' views, the researchers tried to find out whether or not using pair work has any effect on the participants' motivation.

## Method

In this study, quantitative and qualitative data analyses were used. Following a quasi-experimental design for not having random sampling (Mackey & Gass, 2005) the present study aimed to answer the following research question for the quantitative part of the work:

1. Are the learners who do the tasks and activities in pairs more motivated than those who do the same tasks individually?

For the qualitative part of the study, the following is the research question:

2. What are the possible reasons behind the teachers' attitudes toward using the pair-work in their classes?

*Participants*

The participants were thirty EFL learners (17 females and 13 males) who enrolled in an advanced level in a language institute in Tehran, Iran. The average age of the students was 21 and they were divided into two groups of fifteen each. The participants were informed that the questionnaire would not affect their grades. In addition, two female EFL teachers with an MA degree in TEFL participated in the study.

*Instruments*

## Class observation

Through different unannounced sessions of class observation, two EFL classes were observed during a six-week period. The observations were carried by two female teachers introduced by the institute supervisor. The researchers aimed to investigate how much pair work was used per session. The teachers were not informed of the objective of the study in order not to change their personal teaching methods.

## Motivation questionnaire

For the purpose of data collection, a Likert-type questionnaire consisting of 35 questions, based on a five-point scale of "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree", was administered to all the participants (Appendix A). The most relevant items were extracted from Schmidt, Boraie, and Kassabgy (1996), Mi and Than (2008), and Corbalan, Kester & van Merriënboer (2009) by the researchers.

The maximum score one could get from the questionnaire was 175 and if a participant did not answer one item, the score for that item would be zero. Moreover, the items which were against having pair work in class, so-called the negative ones, were reversely marked (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2009). Therefore, items number 2, 3, 7, 14, 16, 21, 26, 29, 32, 33, and 34 were marked backward (SD=5, SA=1). This questionnaire was administered to gather the students' opinions concerning pair work activities.

## Teacher interviews

At the end of the treatment period, the two teachers were interviewed regarding the use of pair work in their classes. They explained the reasons for implementing or not implementing pair work in their classes.

*Procedure*

To initiate the study, the researchers consulted with one of the supervisors of the English language institute concerning the purpose of the study. Consequently, the supervisor introduced two teachers whose classes he had already observed. The supervisor noticed that one of the teachers incorporated pair work in her teaching sessions, while the other rarely used pair work. One of the advanced-level classes of each teacher was chosen. The second researcher of the present study observed both classes during a six-week period to see whether the teachers incorporated pair work or not. The classes were held three sessions a week. Each session lasted for three hours (a total of nine hours per week). After the researcher's observations, a motivation questionnaire was administered to all the participants in both groups. Moreover, both teachers were interviewed regarding the use of pair work in their classes and the rationale behind it.

## Results and discussion

During the observation sessions, it was found that the PO group's teacher was much more enthusiastic to use pair work in her class while the IO group's teacher did not seem to enjoy using it. The PO group's teacher used a variety of pair work activities such as role play, discussion, dialogue, interview, and information gap. The researcher's observation also confirmed the supervisor's claim regarding the two teachers.

The motivation questionnaire was administered to the participants in both groups. Finally, the questionnaire was scored. Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations for PO and IO groups.

| Group | N | Mean | Std Deviation | Std Error Mean |
|-------|---|------|---------------|----------------|
| PO | 15 | 135.67 | 22.55 | 5.82 |
| IO | 15 | 118.6 | 22.61 | 5.83 |

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for both groups

The result of the *t*-test pointed out that the mean score of the PO group (135.67) is significantly different from the mean of the control group, $t(28)=2.070$, $p=0.048$. This indicates that the learners who did the tasks and activities in pairs were more motivated than those who did the same tasks individually.

According to the findings, pair work positively influences learners' motivation. This means that the more EFL teachers take advantage of pair work in their classes, the higher the motivation of the students will be. This increase in learners' motivation can highly affect how they participate in class and what they might accomplish. Storch (2007) investigated the effect of pair work on a text-editing task; the records showed that the language learners could psychologically help each other to communicate more with the correct language use.

The two participating teachers expressed their opinions of pair work in the interviews. The researcher asked why the teacher in the PO group implemented a good amount of pair-work in her classes and she tried to explain her attitude toward using pair work in the classes in her own words. She believed that while doing pair work activities, students could exchange ideas, learn through interaction with their partners, and do the assigned tasks more easily and faster. Moreover, pair work maximized the opportunity for speaking more. Meanwhile, the class setting seemed more dynamic to her.  Some of her reasons are mentioned below:

> I like their attitude toward doing a task in their pairs. They are readier than me to exchange ideas. The leaders are real leaders. There is some noise, but I really think it is like being in a street with crowds of cheerful people who enjoy speaking. They even try to use foreign gestures! Also they learn everything faster. I prefer not to make my class boring. Setting a time limit and the bonus points for extra activities saved me from having an orchestra in the class.

As you can see, the PO group's teacher figured that pair work had added a socio-cultural strand to her syllabus; this could be inferred by her using the phase "foreign gestures". The students tried to internalize native-like pronunciation and reflect on the English when interacting in pairs.

Unlike the IO group, the researchers found the PO group more engaged with particular positive attitudes toward the class, the teacher, and the existing context.

The students in the PO group strongly agreed with the following statements from the questionnaire:

- Students learn more about how to share the responsibilities when working in pairs/groups.
- I like English learning activities in which students work together in pairs or small groups.
- I often have a strong feeling of satisfaction when I become totally involved in a group achievement.

In the socio-educational model, these statements challenge a special kind of attitude so-called the "integrative attitude" which truly affects the learners' motivation (Gardner, Lalonde, & Pierson, 1983).

The psycholinguistic theory of interaction discussed by Long (1983) gave credit to the facilitative effect of interaction in L2 classes. Similarly in this study, it was observed that the tasks done in pairs created a friendlier atmosphere in the PO group classes. The class setting seemed to be more dynamic and lively compared with the IO group. The PO group teacher also created some situations in which the students felt a sense of accomplishment. Positive feedback and bonus points also encouraged the language learners to win the so-called *games*. In a study by Corbalan, Kester & van Merriënboer (2009), it is suggested that if learners enjoy a high level of self-efficacy, all the feedback available could motivate them sufficiently. However, in the IO group, the students were sometimes rewarded with chocolate or coffee, or punished by being obliged to buy cookies for everyone for the next session (of course, for the sake of having fun).

The researchers also perceived that the PO group's teacher had the language learners set their own short-term goals. Shell et al. (2010) believed that setting particular goals could direct working memory allocation to learning. The learners in the PO group experienced having short-term goals, so they could vividly relate to their feelings after reading this statement of the questionnaire: Even when the pair is achieving its goal, I don't really feel involved or satisfied.

On the other hand, the IO group's teacher put more emphasis on the shortcomings of pair work. She told the researchers that pair work gave the teacher little control of the whole class and caused noise and classroom management problems. She also argued that pair work encouraged students' use of their mother tongue and that there was usually inequality while sharing the responsibilities in pairs or groups. She said that she believed in the advantages of pair-work, yet she could not ignore the shortcomings which outweighed its advantages.

The IO group's teacher supported her strategies of not using pair work as follows:

> I know many things about the interaction hypothesis and putting away the teacher's dominance in EFL setting but whenever I tried to adapt to the modern ways of teaching English, it was impossible to stick to the lesson plan. It is a mess, even in advanced classes, when you see students are waiting for a chance to get out of their chairs and take a chance to have fun!! They are capable of negotiating in English but they just like to use Persian because they know it is forbidden in my classes. I can't control their laughs too! I mostly experienced these difficulties in my mixed-gendered classes. Boys compete with each other to be the funniest guy…

Thus, the teacher in the IO group mostly worried about discipline problem in her class and meeting the course objectives. According to further analysis, the researchers

found that her teaching methodology made her follow some teaching strategies in the class regardless of class size and students' genders.

The better performance of the PO group in the motivation questionnaire can be attributed to some characteristics of pair work. Students like to work in pairs because:

1. They can communicate with their friends.
2. They have less work to do because they split it with their friends.
3. They have more time to practice speaking.
4. They can learn from their friends.
5. They feel more comfortable when talking to their friends in English.

On the other hand, the IO group members asserted that they did not like pair work because:

1. They often think the work becomes too confusing when done in a pair rather than individually.
2. They rarely feel relaxed within a group or pair.
3. They do not feel responsible for others learning in groups.
4. They sometimes feel let down by other group members.
5. They sometimes feel nervous when they have to give their ideas or communicate to others.

The pedagogical implication of this small-scale study is that pair work plays a significant role in the language class. It seems to promote greater learner engagement and hence participation in task-based activities. The evidence from the observations showed that the PO group's teacher provided pair and group activities to develop students' confidence. She also tried to connect language learning to students' interests outside the class like what she did about motivating her students to watch TV series such as *Friends*.

It is the nature of interaction that enables learners to increase their participation. Certainly, this greater participation may be because pair work allows learners to communicate at their own paces, thus reducing learner anxiety. It decreases classroom tension and enables students to help each other. Furthermore, peers motivate each other to achieve success.

Students are likely to use English through negotiation of meaning by interacting with each other. In the language classroom, interaction occurs between the teacher and the learners and among learners as well. Unlike learner-learner interaction, teacher-learner interaction appears more likely to elicit modes of communication in which one partner is more dominant, often acting as an expert. But learner-learner interaction gives them a sense of "ownership" of their learning and this happens in pair work activities. This is more likely to lead learners to perform the assigned task with more motivation. Pair work is usually carried out in learner-centered classes in which learners' needs, styles, and goals are important.

**Conclusion**

Foreign language learning classroom environment promotes interaction between language learners. This study examined a very small aspect of this interaction from the point of view of pair work activities in EFL classes. Learner-learner interaction has many different benefits, one of which is getting learners' attentions and keeping learners' interests.

The findings of this study suggest that pair work has positive contributions to learners' motivations; however, there are some obstacles to the implementation of pair work such as:

1. unsuitable seating arrangement;
2. insufficient amount of time;
3. students' unfamiliarity with working in pairs/groups;
4. students' lack of awareness of how to share equal responsibilities; and
5. students' shyness when talking in English.

Yet despite all these obstacles that an EFL teacher may encounter, the use of pair work is still recommended. It is worth mentioning that this study indicated that pair work could increase students' motivation. Motivation is one of the factors strongly associated with learners' second language achievement. In this vein, Ushida (2005) states that motivation plays a primary role in learning a second language and affects acquiring the target culture. Moreover, Winnie and Marx (1979, cited in Ushida, 2005) claimed that "motivation is both a condition for, and a result of, effective instruction" (p. 49).  So, considering a teaching method, such as pair work integration, which increases the students' motivation, helps the students acquire the English language.

This suggests that the more EFL teachers take advantage of pair work in their classes, the higher the motivation of the learners will be. There are, of course, many other factors which have not been discussed here, but which may also influence the outcomes of the study like its small scale. Thus, this study does note some limitations in presenting the findings; focusing on only observation of two classrooms and just interviewing with the teachers do not provide outcomes that can be generalized to other settings. Besides, an observer might not be able to capture what every pair is doing at all times. Due to these limitations, it is advised that more similar research is needed to prove the findings from this study. Finally, in-depth interviews with the teachers and students in both groups, the participants' gender, and how to organize pairs are also recommended to be considered in future related studies.

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## Appendix A Students' Pair-work Motivation Questionnaire

Strongly Disagree/Disagree/Neutral/Agree/Strongly Agree

1.  I like English learning activities in which students work together in pairs or small groups.
2.  I prefer to work by myself in the English class, not with other students.
3.  Group activities and pair-work in the English class are a waste of time.
4.  It creates a relaxing learning environment.
5.  It helps students solve tasks better and faster.
6.  It gives each student more time for speaking practice.
7.  I don't like pair-work because the teacher cannot reach and help everyone.
8.  It gives students more chances to exchange ideas with each other.
9.  It enhances students' effective use of English when talking to each other.
10. Students give more help to each other.
11. Students learn more about how to share the responsibilities when working in pairs/groups.
12. It helps improve students' fluency.
13. It helps students feel more confident when speaking English.
14. I don't like pair-work because I have to move my seat.
15. I enjoy working within a pair or group.
16. I sometimes feel nervous when I have to give my ideas or communicate to others.
17. I understand information better after explaining it to others.
18. I feel more accepted by others after working within a pair or group.
19. I often find it difficult to understand what the pair task is.
20. I prefer to work within a pair rather than work alone.
21. Even when the pair is achieving its goal, I don't really feel involved or satisfied.
22. I often have a strong feeling of satisfaction when I become totally involved in a group achievement.
23. It is important that other group members take responsibility for my learning as well.
24. Pairs should organize themselves so that the work is divided evenly.
25. I usually make a strong personal contribution to pair-work.
26. I am often afraid to ask for help from my friends.
27. Contributing ideas within a group or pair often makes me feel better about myself.
28. I can usually understand other group members' ideas.
29. Even when pairs are well organized, I don't believe they are a more effective way of using class time.
30. It is best when each person helps each other within a group or pair.
31. I often think the work becomes too confusing when done in a pair rather than individually.
32. I rarely feel relaxed within a group or pair.
33. I do not feel responsible for others learning in groups.
34. I sometimes feel let down by other group members.
35. I often feel in charge when working within a group.