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Research Article

A Comparative Study of the Effects of Interactive Versus Individual Performance Tasks on EFL Learners' Speaking Skill

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Abstract

Interaction has always been viewed as a key element in developing the knowledge of an L2 and establishing dynamic communicative episodes. However, it is not always materialized in foreign language learning contexts where access to English speakers is limited. Hence, this study investigated the effects of employing interactive and individual performance tasks on Iranian male EFL learners' speaking ability. The participants were 32 homogeneous upper-intermediate EFL learners in two intact classes randomly assigned to two experimental groups. The first experimental group performed problem-solving, reasoning-gap, and opinion-gap tasks individually, and the second employed problem-solving, reasoning-gap, and information-gap tasks through team-work for 16 sessions. Two speaking pre- and post-tests were administered to evaluate the participants' oral performance before and after the treatment. The statistical analysis of the data showed no statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the two groups on the speaking post-test, indicating that neither form of performance was superior to the other in the process of developing L2 oral proficiency. However, the results of two paired samples t-tests demonstrated that the learners' speaking skill had significantly improved in both groups at the end of the experiment. Therefore, the researchers concluded that a careful execution of individual performance tasks in the absence of interaction could also contribute to developing speaking an L2.

Keywords: communicative tasks, interactive tasks, individual tasks, speaking, TBLT

Introduction

Speaking skill is considered the most challenging language skill for most EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students in linguistic environments where English is not an official or widely used language (Yeh et al., 2021). On the road to achieving communicative competence, EFL learners usually face various challenges like the lack of opportunity to communicate in real-life situations, and even after multiple semesters of studying, they still suffer from serious deficiencies in terms of oral proficiency (Erlam, 2015). Unfortunately, some students struggle in linguistically low resource contexts where they frequently have little or no access to target language speakers (Long, 2014). Clearly, such challenges not only target students but also EFL teachers. As a result, it is even more important to take some measures to compensate for the lack of access to ample real-life opportunities to converse with peers in authentic contexts.

During the past two decades, Task Based Language Teaching (TBLT) has gained more attention as a method used for teaching real-life communication (Ulla, 2020). One reason for this paradigm shift is that recent years of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research have been ripe with a growing number of studies in developing EFL learners' ability to achieve communicative goals in interaction (Van Batenburg et al., 2016). Moreover, the profession of English Language Teaching (ELT) has continued to emphasize the role of classroom interaction, learner-centered teaching, authenticity, and learners' experience as important contributors to L2 (Second Language) learning. As a result, task-based instruction has directed the attention of teachers and learners to perform tasks in the class (Bygate, 2020). Besides, since real-life communication is the ultimate goal of L2 learners, it is essential to investigate the different variables that might affect the speaking ability of EFL learners (Brand & Götz, 2013). Hence, a large body of research has been conducted to explore more optimum methods within the framework of TBLT (Aubrey et al., 2020). However, certain variables such as individually performed tasks have received less attention than they truly deserve.

A review of recent studies on SLA, especially those related to speaking, demonstrates how little has been done regarding in-class interactions among EFL students. In fact, only a few studies (e.g., Ellis, 2017; Kang, 2018) have addressed the effectiveness of interactive versus individual tasks or an impartial comparison of the two. While some scholars, such as Garcia Mayo (2007), argue that collaboration with peers gives the learners a chance to merge their knowledge, there is not sufficient scientific evidence proving such claims. Investigating interactive and individual in-class interactions while employing a task-based approach can open new windows for further

studies, especially concerning the quality of developing the speaking skill among learners. Ellis (2017) also advises that despite the numerous TBLT studies which address interactive and collaborative means of L2 learning, TBLT is not exclusively based on pair and group activities. Besides, the use of interactive tasks is not always feasible as some students with more active affective filters or diverse personal preferences might not enjoy participation in interactive activities to a great extent. Thus, the benefits of interactive tasks must be benchmarked against individual tasks for making more efficient decisions regarding language learning and teaching.

To sum up, until recently, the employment of pair, group, and interactive work was considered a "must-have" in EFL classrooms. The present study was carried out to challenge this assumption into question through examining the so-called superiority of interactive tasks to individual performance tasks in EFL classrooms.

The Holy Grail in Language Learning

Nowadays, learning a foreign language is more important than ever before, and communication serves as a common goal among learners. Achieving communicative competence and interacting with English native speakers has, indeed, turned into the ultimate goal of most EFL/ESL learners (Zarrinabadi et al., 2021). While the speaking skill has held a central place in the recent history of language teaching, authentic interactions have received relatively little attention in second language instruction. A shift toward learners' needs analysis and real out-of-class oral performance is easily noticeable in the latest L2 teaching trends.

In everyday conversations, one is more likely to be asked: "How many languages do you speak?" rather than: "How many languages do you write or read?" In fact, speaking is considered to be the key skill by which a language is acquired (Liao, 2009). Thus, it is not odd to claim that it is speech, not writing, which serves as the natural means of communication between members of a community to express thoughts and manifest social behavior. According to Saito and Akiyama (2016), during the past 40 years, the role of conversational interaction in SLA has been among the top researched issues. Similarly, Hughes and Reed (2016) propose that the spoken form of English language has gained primacy in language teaching sciences in the 20th century. In fact, speaking is a complex and multifaceted construct that is, as Thornbury and Slade (2006) point out, intertwined with daily interactions. Nonetheless, there still remain some unexplored aspects of the speaking skill that await further empirical research.

Interaction: An Underexplored TBLT Aspect

TBLT is considered an effective teaching approach, superior to traditional methods (Swan, 2005). This method holds that linguistic features are learned through noticing during communication (Ellis, 2003). Moreover, it views effective learning through the active use of language by learners and draws on the interaction among learners. Interaction is a means by which learners construct meaning and create learning opportunities cooperatively (Moore, 2018). According to Vygotsky, L2 learners are said to grasp linguistic knowledge in socially situated activities (Storch, 2002). This idea stipulates that group and pair work create a context in which L2 learners can take part in activities that promote interaction and co-construction of knowledge.

In the same vein, Swan (2005) states that one of the key principles of TBLT is that L2 acquisition takes place through communication. Poupore (2016) also acknowledges that cooperative L2 learning offers invaluable motivational and educational benefits. Thus, what L2 learners need is a positive social atmosphere within the group which fosters a sense of trust, enthusiasm, joy, and achievement. Moreover, using group-based pedagogical activities can be accompanied by cohesiveness among students (Nunan, 2004). Around four decades ago, Pica and Doughty (1987) demonstrated that group work fosters a desirable linguistic environment that contributes to L2 learning. Similarly, in a recent study, Chen (2016) concluded that optimal task completion requires two L2 learners who are attentive listeners responding to each other, offering feedback to each other, and actively collaborating in the completion of a given task. Apparently, almost all scholars unanimously advocate the efficiency of pair and group work in enhancing leaners' communicative skills. Some of the observable benefits of group work pointed out by Ellis (2017) include boasting language production, promoting the quality of student verbal exchanges, contributing to individualized instruction, creating a positive affective atmosphere, and motivating the students.

According to Gillies and Boyle (2010), open discussion during cooperative group activities leads to clarification of views and perspectives in a context free from continuous interventions by the teacher and the larger class population. Besides, learners who are collaborating in a group do not have to rely on the teacher as their sole listener and provider of L2 input. Here, it is possible for peers to provide the required language models themselves (Erten & Altay, 2009) and to engage in interactive activities with each other. Additionally, they can function as natural interlocutors, which makes a much greater variety of models available for practice purposes (Long & Porter, 1985). Group activities also increase the learners' metacognitive awareness. As Gillies and Boyle (2010) stipulate, peers are often more sensitive to misunderstandings than their instructors. Cooperative group activities also

result in the creation of a more relaxed climate in the class, reduce stress and repression and, hence, promotes the quantity and quality of classroom practice (Erten & Altay 2009; Ur, 2015). It is also believed that collaborative work usually has a positive effect on task performance (Storch, 2002).

In most English language classes today, learners are encouraged to participate in tasks alongside their peers to improve their speaking skill as well as their overall linguistic ability (Karas, 2016). Furthermore, a plethora of studies (e.g., Lantolf, 2000; Storch, 2002; Swain, 2000) on this sociocultural view have shown that peer collaboration gives L2 learners the chance to pool their linguistic knowledge, which can lead to better L2 acquisition. In fact, Vygotsky held a social view of constructivism and proposed notions like mediation and zone of proximal development (ZPD), which indicate that learners can construct meaning and perceive the world around them by means of interaction with more accomplished peers. Accordingly, sociocultural factors are prerequisites for the development of learning processes along with biological factors (Rieker, 2021). Studies on the overall effectiveness of interactive L2 learning environments demonstrate that collaborative tasks promote more effortless communication and develop interpersonal skills to a fairly higher degree (e.g., Chen, 2016; Dorathy & Mahalakshmi, 2011; Illés & Akcan, 2016; Rahman, 2010).

Although CLT (Communicative Language Teaching) and TBLT are among the popular trends in current language teaching methodology, there are still many unanswered questions regarding the efficiency of the related techniques for teaching different language skills and areas in different situations. For instance, in the context of TBLT, tasks are mainly directed at speaking (Guo et al., 2020); however, the extent and effectiveness of interactions in oral tasks are not clarified. In addition, TBLT might be mistakenly viewed as synonymous with the mere incorporation of interactions and collaborative tasks; nevertheless, Ellis (2017) warns practitioners in L2 contexts that TBLT tasks are not only paired or interaction-oriented. While the interaction hypothesis and sociocultural theory support the significance of peer interaction in TBLT (Chen, 2019), almost no valid theory or research has targeted the significance of individual performance tasks, and how they stack up against interactive ones. Consequently, researchers need to shed some light on such underexplored factors through further empirical research. Developing a clear view in this regard is of prime importance particularly when the students have no choice but to perform the related tasks on their own in foreign-language learning (FLL) contexts.

Interactive vs. Individual Tasks

According to Ellis (2017), SLA research on tasks needs to further inquire into areas such as individual versus group-based tasks. Although many scholars and researchers have addressed the advantages of interactive tasks and group work in SLA (e.g., Chen, 2019; Guo & Xu, 2020; Mackey, 2020; Poupore, 2016), few researchers have addressed different aspects and qualities of individual tasks. One issue that can affect L2 learning through individual activities is the individual differences among L2 learners. Therefore, it is far from certain to assert that all learners can benefit from group tasks just as they do from individual tasks. In fact, all the individual differences that might lead to variations in the route and rate of developing language skills, particularly the speaking skill, should be taken into account when exploring the related techniques and strategies. For example, Long (2015) lists attitude, motivation, extroversion, self-esteem, ego permeability, anxiety, and willingness to communicate as the most important variables that might affect the process of learning. The same factors might influence the students' choices when involved in group tasks or individually performed tasks.

Hence, the assumption that interactive tasks always excel individual tasks without considering individual differences and available empirical pieces of evidence might be misleading. In one of the few studies addressing individual tasks, Mayo (2007) reported that a group of students could produce a particular grammatical structure jointly while not being able to do so individually. However, little is known about the individual differences and task types given to the learners in such studies.

In a study comparing individual and collaborative tasks (Reinders, 2010), as an individual reconstruction task, a group of students were required to reconstruct a passage after listening to it twice. This task called for the delayed recall of what the participants had listened to, which was based on the notes they had taken during the listening phase. The only difference between the collaborative reconstruction task and individual reconstruction task was that the former was performed in pairs. The researcher reported that the individual reconstruction scores were the lowest, and the collaborative reconstruction treatment had significantly improved the students' performance on the given task.

Several studies have addressed the effects of employing TBLT on improving EFL learners' speaking skills and the ways of acquiring a more real-life version of the second language (e.g., Chen & Zhang, 2015; Dorathy & Mahalakshmi, 2011; Illés & Akcan, 2016; Rahman, 2010). In fact, since achieving communicative competence in L2 is a major goal for most learners, there has been a growing plethora of research investigating various

dimensions of L2 learners' involvement in communicative language tasks (Revesz, 2014). Some studies have also addressed peer interaction and collaboration regarding the development of the speaking skill in a TBLT context (e.g., Erten & Altay, 2009; Oliver & Philp & Duchesne, 2017). Erten and Altay (2009) compared the impact of task-based and topic-based speaking activities on students' interaction and collaboration in EFL oral classes and concluded that performing speaking tasks may be more beneficial in developing a more collaborative learning context, in which there are greater opportunities for real-life language use.

Amongst the wide array of TBLT studies, one important question has still remained almost unanswered: Are interactive tasks superior to individual ones? Currently, in many L2 classrooms, the use of group work has become more prominent (Nunan, 2004). While the number of studies on the use of TBLT-oriented interactive and collaborative activities are growing, it should be noted that TBLT is not solely based on pair work and group activities (Ellis, 2017). Group work does offer potential advantages; however, the over-application of this principle can result in a kind of learner-centeredness that downplays other instructional and interactional patterns (East, 2017). Moreover, the need for more in-depth studies is still felt regarding the scope of learners' interactions in TBLT to enhance L2 learners' speaking skill. Thus, this study examined the effects of interactive and individual performance tasks on developing the speaking ability of upper-intermediate Iranian EFL learners in order to delve into an underexplored aspect of the teaching and learning of L2 speaking. Hence, the following research question was posed for the purposes of this study:

RQ: To what extent does the employment of interactive versus individual performance tasks affect Iranian upper-intermediate EFL learners' speaking skill?

Method

Participants

Forty Iranian male upper-intermediate EFL students at a language institute in Tehran participated in the present study. They were between 13 and 19 years old, and their first language was Persian. They were in two intact classes randomly assigned to two experimental groups. The first experimental group (EXI) performed the intended tasks (opinion-gap, reasoning-gap & problem-solving) tasks individually, and the second group (EXII) performed the selected tasks (information-gap, reasoning-gap, problem-solving tasks) through team-work. Since the nature of information-gap tasks calls for interaction, they were replaced by opinion-gap tasks in the individual

performance tasks group. Eight participants were identified as outliers based on the results of the FCE (First Certificate in English) test, leaving 32 students as the ultimate participants of the study.

Instruments and Materials

The details of the instruments and materials in this study are given below.

First Certificate in English Test

An FCE test was used to homogenize the participants regarding their English language knowledge. This test is at the B2 difficulty level and is deemed appropriate for upper-intermediate EFL learners. The overall test consists of four parts: Reading and Use of English (7 parts: 52 items, given in 75 minutes), Writing (2 parts: 4 items, given in 80 minutes), Listening (4 parts: 30 items, given in 40 minutes), and Speaking (4 parts, lasting 10-12 minutes for each pair of examinees).

The KR21 reliabilities of the listening and reading sections were 0.80 and 0.82, respectively. The content validity of the test was confirmed by two experienced teachers at the institute. The Pearson Product Moment inter-rater reliabilities of the writing and speaking sections amounted to 0.84, and 0.87, respectively.

Oral Interview Pretest

The speaking section of FCE in the form of 10-to-12-minute interviews in pairs was used to assess the students' speaking ability at the outset of the study. The interviews were recorded and later scored by one of the researchers and an experienced colleague. The students could score between 0-60.

The interview consisted of four parts: in Part 1, the questions focused on the participants' interests, studies, career, etc.; in Part 2, the participants were given two photographs and asked to talk about them; in Part 3 they were given some materials and a task during which they had to talk with their partner and make a decision; in Part 4 they had further discussions with their partner as guided by questions from the examiner about the topics or issues raised the task in Part 3. The inter-rater reliabilities of the speaking pretests were 0.895 and 0.847 for the first and second experimental groups, respectively.

Oral Interview Post-test

At the end of the 16-week experiment, a speaking posttest, similar to the speaking pretest, was administered to the participants of the two experimental groups to measure the potential changes in their speaking ability. Similar procedures for recording and scoring the participants' performance were

followed. It is worth mentioning that the topics used in the speaking pretest and posttest were different; however, the format, timing, and overall procedures remained identical in both groups. The inter-rater reliabilities of the speaking posttest were 0.822 and 0.798 for EX I and EX II groups, respectively.

The Assessing Speaking Performance Rubric

The Assessing Speaking Performance – Level B2 rubric by Cambridge ESOL (English to Speakers of Other Languages) was used by two raters (the teacher & one of his experienced colleagues at the institute) to score the students' pretest recordings. This rubric is divided into six bands from 0 to 5, with 0 being the lowest and 5 the highest. There are four criteria, namely, grammar and vocabulary, discourse management, pronunciation, and interactive communication. Descriptors for each criterion are provided for bands 1, 3 and 5 and indicate what a candidate is expected to demonstrate at each band.

The Assessing Writing Performance Rubric

The Assessing Writing Performance – Level B2 rubric by Cambridge ESOL was used by the same two raters to assess the overall writing ability of the participants in the writing section of the FCE test. Based on this scale, the students' written works are rated in terms of four criteria: content, communicative achievement, organization, and language. Five marks are allocated to each criterion, and each writing task is given a score of 20 (2 writing tasks in total, which makes 40 points overall).

Materials

To achieve the goals of the research, the materials listed below were used:

1. *Solutions,* Upper-Intermediate (2012) was used as the main course book for the participants.
2. *Solutions,* Upper-Intermediate Workbook (2012) was used for further practice in both classes.
3. The speaking topics were chosen based on the course book topics. Some extra topics in close relationship with the topics in the students' course book were also discussed each session.

Procedure

The researchers designed and followed a step-by-step procedure in order to conduct this study. Prior to the treatment, the First Certificate in English test (FCE) was given to both groups to check their homogeneity regarding language proficiency. The speaking part of the same test was used to ensure the homogeneity of the two groups in terms of speaking ability in two extra

sessions apart from the treatment period. The complete test, which measures all four skills (reading, writing, listening & speaking) and use of English, was used in the study.

During the treatment period, all the participants studied *Solutions* Series, Upper-Intermediate book (Falla & Davies, 2012) units five and six in the course of a 16-session semester with the same teacher. The treatment started in the second session after administering the FCE test and the speaking pretest and continued for 14 sessions. Experimental group I (EXI) performed individual tasks (opinion-gap, reasoning-gap & problem-solving tasks), and experimental group II (EXII) performed interactive tasks (information-gap, reasoning-gap & problem-solving tasks). All the tasks were designed based on the course book taught during the term. Additionally, to motivate the learners to speak more and to vary the speaking tasks, extra topics were chosen by the teacher and discussed during each session.

Different individual tasks were used in EXI; for example, the students were asked to express their opinions through individual brainstorming. They were given some time to think about the topic (e.g., mercy killing) and to express their personal ideas to the class (opinion-gap). For individual reasoning-gap tasks, they used reason and logic to offer solutions to the posed problem. For example, they were asked to make a decision between speed and cost or cost and quality while traveling. In the course of individual problem-solving tasks, the students were exposed to different issues and problems (noisy neighbors, pollution, etc.) and asked to come up with a solution by themselves and then present it to the class. No interactive, paired, or group tasks were used in EXI.

Conversely, all the tasks employed in EXII were of an interactive nature. The speaking tasks were performed in pairs, groups of three, and whole-class discussions. When performing interactive information-gap tasks, the students asked questions from their partners (e.g., about their family, or described incomplete pictures to each other). During the reasoning-gap tasks, the learners decided what course of action served them best (for instance, cheapest or fastest) for the intended purpose through group reasoning and deduction. Furthermore, in the course of problem-solving tasks, which were performed in pairs and groups of three or more, the students discussed a given issue and decided on the best solution through interacting with each other.

During the treatment sessions, the teacher tried to motivate inactive and reticent students by encouraging them and matching them with more talkative peers. Extra marks and positive points were given to all the active students as a reward. Besides, to avoid the domination of more active students over the discussions in group activities, the teacher supervised and observed the participants' negotiations during the tasks and provided help whenever

necessary. However, he avoided interrupting them unless communication was impeded. The teacher tried to maintain a balance between the numbers of speaking tasks in EXI and EXII in terms of time. Thus, both groups performed two pre-selected tasks per session over a period of 10 sessions. About 40 minutes was allocated to task performance.

When the treatment ended, a similar speaking pretest with a different topic was administered to the members of the two experimental groups to measure the potential changes in their speaking ability. Similar procedures for recording and scoring the participants' performance were followed. Finally, to check the potential effects of the treatment, a Levene's test and an independent samples t-test were used to compare the variances and means of the two groups.

Data Analysis

SPSS 25 was used to analyze the data. Initially, descriptive statistics were computed for all the quantitative data obtained from the instruments of the study. The reliability indices of the Listening and Reading sections of the homogeneity test were computed using the KR-21 formula and the inter-rater reliability indices of the writing and speaking tests were computed using the Pearson Product-Moment Formula.

Furthermore, the normality of the score distributions was examined prior to running the Levene's test, which was used to check the homogeneity of the variances of the two groups on the given tests. Two independent samples t-tests were calculated to compare the means of the two experimental groups on the pretest and posttest of the study. Finally, two paired samples t-tests were computed to check the significance of the treatment within each experimental group.

Results

FCE Test Results

As mentioned before, the FCE test was utilized to probe the students' homogeneity regarding language knowledge. After correcting the papers, a thorough item analysis process was conducted for the 20 multiple-choice items of the listening section (the listening section consisted of 30 items in total) and 30 multiple-choice items of the reading and use section (the reading & use section consisted of 52 items in total). As a result, one listening item and four reading and use items were omitted because of their low item discrimination (ID) and high item facility (IF) indices. Therefore, the scores of the listening and reading and use were calculated out of 29 and 48, respectively. After computing the descriptive statistics for the modified test scores, the reliability quotients of the listening and reading and use sections

were calculated using the Kuder Richardson 21 formula, (0.80 & 0.82, respectively). Moreover, eight students were identified as outliers, leaving 32 of them as the ultimate research participants. They were in two classes that were later randomly divided into two experimental (EXI & EXII) groups. Finally, the outcomes of a Levene's test and an independent samples t-test indicated the equality of the variances and means of the two groups' scores. The descriptive statistics of the total FCE test scores and the listening and reading scores are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics of the FCE Test and Listening and Reading Sections

				Mean		Skewness	
	N	Min	Max	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
FCE	40	80	135	104.4250	1.89014	0.578	0.374
Listening	40	9	28	17.8750	0.87866	0.001	0.374
Reading & Use	40	10	39	24.5000	1.09778	0.102	0.374

The KR-21 reliability of the listening and reading and use sections were 0.80 and 0.82, respectively. In order to reduce subjectivity in scoring the writing and speaking sections, two raters scored the students' performance on the writing and speaking sections of FCE. The inter-rater reliabilities of the writing and speaking scores amounted to 0.84 and 0.87 respectively (Table 2).

Table 2
Inter-rater Reliabilities for the Writing and Speaking Section of FCE

	Raters	N	Correlation	Sig.
Writing	Rater 1	40	0.84*	0.000
	Rater 2		0.84*	
Speaking	Rater 1	40	0.87*	0.000
	Rater 2		0.87*	

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The 32 participants who scored within 1.5 and – 1.5 standard deviation from the mean score on the homogeneity test were chosen as the ultimate participants of the study in two intact experimental groups with 16 members in each one. Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics of the FCE test scores for each group.

Table 3
Descriptive Statistics of the FCE Test for EXI and EXII

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Error Mean	SD	Skewness Statistic	Std. Error
Experimental 1	16	102	1.72542	6.90169	0.897	0.564
Experimental 2	16	100	1.39708	5.55831	0.970	0.564

Dividing the statistic of skewedness by its standard error for each group, it was concluded that the score distributions of both groups were normal: 0.159 (0.897 /0.564) and 1.71 (0.970 / 0.564) for EXI and EXII, respectively, both located within the range of -1.96 and +1.96. Next, a Levene's test was performed to verify the equality of the variances of EXI and EXII on the FCE test with F=1.233, p = 0.276 (two-tailed), indicating that the two groups had homogenous variances (Table 4).

Table 4
Independent Samples t-test for the FCE Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
FCE Test	Equal Variances assumed	1.23	.276	.647	30	.522	1.43750	2.22011	-3.096	5.9715
	Equal variances not assumed			.647	28.7	.522	1.43750	2.22011	-3.104	5.9798

Moreover, to check the difference between the means of EXI and EXII on the test, an independent samples t-test was employed. With t = 0.647, p =0.522 (two tailed), no statistically significant difference (α= 0.05) was detected between the two groups' means on the FCE test prior to the study. Accordingly, it was deduced that both EXI and EXII belonged to the same population regarding their level of language proficiency before the treatment.

Pre-test Results

Next, the speaking section of the homogeneity test was administered as the pretest to check the participants' speaking ability prior to the treatment. All the students were interviewed in pairs by their teacher. The descriptive statistics are given in Table 5.

Table 5
Descriptive Statistics of the Speaking Pre-test of EXI and EXII

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Error.Mean	SD	Skewness Statistic	Std. Error
Experimental 1	16	37.6	0.9953	3.98121	0.056	0.564
Experimental 2	16	37.5	0.7186	2.87446	0.715	0.564

The inter-rater reliability indexes of the scores of the speaking pretest calculated through the Pearson Product-Moment Formula were 0.895 and 0.847 for EXI and EXII, respectively, showing a high consistency between the two raters (Table 6). Accordingly, the total speaking score of each participant was calculated by averaging their received scores.

Table 6
Inter-Rater Reliabilities for the Speaking Pre-test

Groups	Raters	N	Correlation	Sig.
Experimental 1	Rater 1	16	0.895*	0.000
	Rater 2		0.895*	
Experimental 2	Rater 1	16	0.847*	0.000
	Rater 2		0.847*	

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Once again, the normality of the two groups' score distributions on the speaking pretest were checked using the procedure explained before. The results of skewness analysis were 0.099 (0.056/0.564) and 1.26 (0.715/ 0.564) for EXI and EXII groups, respectively, which testified to the normality of the two score distributions. Next, a Levene's test was performed to verify the equality of the two groups' variances on the test. With F=4.457, p = 0.43 (two-tailed), it was decided that the variances of the two groups were homogenous (Table 7).

Table 7
Independent Samples t-test for the Speaking Pre-test of EXI and EXII

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Pre 1 & 2	Equal Variances assumed	4.45	0.43	0.51	30	.960	0.06250	1.22761	-2.444	2.569
	Equal variances not assumed			0.51	27.2	.960	0.06250	1.22761	-2.455	2.580

Finally, as indicated in Table 7, the outcome of an independent samples t-test (t = 0.051, *p* =0.960 (two tailed) showed no statistically significant difference (α= 0.05) between the mean scores of EXI and EXII on the speaking pretest.

Post-test Results

Eventually, a speaking posttest was given to the members of EXI and EXII groups to check for potential changes in their speaking ability. The descriptive statistics of the posttest are provided in Table 8.

Table 8
Descriptive Statistics of the Speaking Post-Test for EXI and EXII

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Error Mean	SD	Skewness Statistic	Skewness Std. Error
Experimental 1	16	40.18	0.80218	3.20871	-1.124	0.564
Experimental 2	16	39.62	0.47324	1.89297	0.554	0.564

Furthermore, the inter-rater reliabilities of the raters' scores to the posttest calculated through the Person Product-Moment formula were 0.822 and 0.798 for EXI and EXII, respectively, indicting a satisfactory level of agreement between the raters' ratings of the students' performance (Table 9).

Table 9
Inter-Rater Reliabilities for the Speaking Post-Test

Groups	Raters	N	Correlation	Sig.
Experimental 1	Rater 1	16	0.822*	0.000
	Rater 2		0.822*	
Experimental 2	Rater 1	16	0.798*	0.000
	Rater 2		0.798*	

* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

After ensuring the consistency between the two raters, the total score of each participant was calculated through averaging the two scores given by the raters. Based on the results of skewness analysis, -0.219 (-0.124/0.564) for EXI and 0.98 (0.554/ 0.564) for EXII, it was decided that the two groups' speaking post-test score distributions were normal. Finally, a Levene's test and an independent samples t-test were used to compare the two groups' variances and mean scores on the post-test (Table 10).

Table 10
Independent Samples t-test for the Speaking Post-test of the two Experimental Groups

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Post 1 & 2	Equal Variances assumed	5.82	.022	0.60	30	.550	0.56250	0.93137	-1.339	2.464
	Equal variances not assumed			0.60	24.3	.551	0.56250	0.93137	-1.358	2.483

The result of the Levene's test, F = 5.82, p = 0.022 (two-tailed), showed the equality of the variances of the two groups. Moreover, with t (30) = 0.60, p = 0.550 (two-tailed), no statistically significant difference was found between the means of EXI and EXII. In other words, both independent variables, individual and interactive tasks, had equally affected the participants' speaking skill.

In addition, the progress of each group at the close of the course was checked by running two paired samples t-tests. The results are demonstrated in Tables11 and 12.

Table 11
Paired Samples t-test for EXI

Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Mean	SD	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
			Lower	Upper			
-2.5625	3.2242	0.8060	-4.2805	-0.8444	-3.179	15	0.006*

* Significant at the 0.05 level

As illustrated in Table 11, with t (15) = -3.179, p = 0.006 (two-tailed), it was concluded that the difference between the pretest and posttest mean scores of EXI was statistically significant.

Table 12
Paired Samples t-test for EXII

Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Mean	SD	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
			Lower	Upper			
-2.0625	2.1124	0.5281	-3.1881	-0.9368	-3.905	15	0.001*

* Significant at the 0.05 level

Likewise, as indicated in Table 12, with t (15) = -3.905, p = 0.001 (two-tailed), a significant difference was observed between the pretest and posttest mean scores of EXII.

Discussion

The present study was conducted to investigate the effects of interactive and individual performance tasks on developing the speaking ability of upper-intermediate Iranian male EFL learners. Given the findings of this study, both individual and interactive tasks could efficiently contribute to L2 learners' speaking ability. Accordingly, the idea that paired or group work is the most efficient element in learning to speak an L2 was challenged since the interactive tasks group failed to outperform the members of the individual performance tasks on the posttest.

The results of this study do not support those of some previous studies that encourage the promotion of interaction in the class (e.g., Akcan & Illés, 2016; Chen & Zhang, 2015; Dorathy & Mahalakshmi, 2011; Erten & Altay, 2009; Rahman, 2010). In this regard, Dorathy and Mahalakshmi (2011) suggest that through role plays and TBLT, EFL learners not only acquire a broader perspective of a task or a new linguistic context but also a broader horizon of better communication and interpersonal skills. In the same vein, Erten and

Altay (2009) conclude that task-based speaking activities may be more advantageous to creating a more collaborative learning environment, in which there are greater opportunities for real-life language use.

However, the findings of the present study are in line with those of a few others (East, 2017; Ellis, 2017). East (2017) maintains that group work does offer potential advantages; however, an over-application of this principle can result in a kind of learner-centeredness that downplays other instructional and interactional patterns. As mentioned before, Ellis (2017) also warns that despite the growing number of TBLT studies exploring interactive and collaborative ways of L2 learning, TBLT is not exclusively based on pair work and group activities, and thus other options must be taken into consideration in planning efficient kinds of practice for different groups.

Moreover, the results of this study support those of more recent studies on the fruitfulness of individual performance tasks. Geng and Ferguson (2013) suggest that there exist benefits in changing classroom organization, especially with pre-task planning. They conclude that individual tasks and planning, which are often not valued and underestimated, must not be neglected as they can be great contributing assets that are on par with group or paired tasks. Similarly, as reported by Baleghizadeh and Asadi (2013), L2 learners' oral fluency can improve significantly by performing individual tasks recycling overall task performance. The findings of this study can be justified relying on the fact that individual planning tasks diminish the number of pauses and enhance learners' fluency compared to collaborative planning (Kang, 2018). In a similar vein, Zolghadri et al. (2020) maintain that individual performance tasks can result in higher scores regarding accuracy, fluency, and complexity compared to pair performance.

The outcome of the present study could be of benefit to EFL learners who wish to improve their oral skills in general, and to those who have a very active affective filter or do not wish to participate in group activities in particular. They could also be of interest to EFL teachers who are in pursuit of more efficient and practical ways to improve learners' communicative skills given the fact that foreign language learners have usually limited access to group activities in out-of-class situations. They could also be significant to SLA researchers who wish to further inquire into TBLT and to compare the usefulness of individual and interactive tasks in different learning contexts. In direct relationship to the deductions of this study, the researchers recommend syllabus designers to adopt an impartial and integrative approach toward the use of pair, group, or individual tasks in L2 classes in order to meet the speaking needs of different learners.

Ultimately, unlike the great number of studies confirming the positive effects of interactive tasks, this study suggests that there might not be a noteworthy inconsistency between the effects of employing individual and interactive tasks on the development of EFL learners' speaking ability. Thus, the researchers highlight the importance of using both interactive and individual tasks in speaking-based and communicative-centered English classrooms. Irrespective of the findings of this study, it is emphasized that the purpose of the present investigation was in no way to underestimate or downplay the huge contribution of pair and group work to the process of language learning, in general, and to the development of L2 speaking, in particular. Rather, it is to foreground the significance of individual tasks in both areas, especially in contexts where pair or group work is not possible or favored by the students.

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