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Is the Number of Peers Effective in the Result of a Learning Group Studying Formulaic Expressions?

Fateme Aryanejad[1]* and Ashraf Ronaghi[2]

1. English Teaching Department, Roudehen Branch, Islamic Azad University, Roudehen, Iran.
2. English Teaching Department, Arak State University, Arak, Iran.
* Corresponding Author's Email: Aryan.fateme@yahoo.com

Abstract- The ability to employ formulaic expressions keys to efficient communication for EFL learners; however, the effectiveness of learning individually or collaboratively is still at a stand. The present study seeks to investigate the effect of individual and collaborative learning on the acquisition of formulaic expressions benefited from non-random sampling. The present study took advantage of two experimental groups of intermediate-female students, namely individual and collaborative groups. The individual group consisted of 21 participants who ought to go through the treatment individually. In contrast, the collaborative group was consisted of 24 participants who worked on the tasks in groups of four. The treatment consisted of 76 idioms presented through readings, practiced through matching and filling in the blanks, and produced through paragraph writing. The idiom tasks were practiced at two levels of comprehension and production. The situation and the material were identical to both of the groups and the only distinction was the number of participants. A placement test and a test of formulaic expressions were the instruments administered in the current research. The result gained through MANOVA confirmed that the individual group surpassed the collaborative group. Social facilitation theory and social loafing hypothesis would justify the rationales behind the findings.

Keywords: formulaic expression, social loafing, and female Iranian adult intermediate EFL learners

I. INTRODUCTION

Formulaic word strings are attributed to a wide range of fixed expressions as "collocations, idioms, compounds, phrasal verbs, social routine formulae, proverbs, and standardized similes and binomial phrases" that can help the L2 learners perform better and then sound more proficient either in "speaking (Boers, Eyckmans, Kappel, Stengers, & Demecheleer, 2006) or in writing (Dai & Ding, 2010)" (as cited in Boers et al., 2014, p. 55).

Due to the "word-centered conceptualization of vocabulary" teaching formulaic expressions was not weighted adequately and that they were "seldom taught in any principled manner or tested as part of overall vocabulary knowledge" (Schmitt & Alali, 2012, p. 154).

Furthermore, they added that "unfortunately, there has been little published research on direct teaching of formulaic sequences" (Schmitt & Alali, 2012, p. 153). It can be concluded that it might not be easy to amount the number of formulaic expressions in the production of language learners but effective instructions can result in more accurate and fluent use of formulaic expressions.

A. The Significance of the Study

The current study is of significance from two pedagogical aspects, firstly it is a study on the collaborative tasks whereas few studies have been conducted on this issue (Abdikhah & Shahriyarpour, 2012; Bradshaw, 1997; Dobao, 2014; Lapkin, Swain & Smith, 2002; Lynch, 2001; Storch, 2005; Swain, 2000; Swain & Lapkin, 1998), and secondly it has studied formulaic expressions with an idiomatic focus while most of the previous researches tackled the acquisition of formulaic expressions focusing on phrasal verbs as Nassaji and Tian (2010), Farsani, Moinzadeh and Tavakoli (2012) and Nosratinia, Amini and Sarabchian (2013) or collocations as Boers et al. (2014), Durrant and Schmitt (2010), Mohammadzadeh (2012). The current study endeavors to examine the efficacy of two divergent types of task completion namely individually and collaboratively on the comprehension and production of idioms.

B. The Importance of learning Formulaic Expressions

The significance of learning formulaic expressions could be highlighted in terms of the idea suggested by Lundblom and Woods (2012) who stipulated that "since idioms occur frequently in classroom language (Lazar, Warr-Leeper, Nicholson, & Johnson, 1989; Nippold, 1991), adolescents with deficits in idiom comprehension could have repercussions in reading comprehension, written composition, and vocabulary learning" (p. 202). “Conklin and Schmitt (2007) indicated that lexical combinations are very common in language discourse and differentiate the speech of native and non-native speakers” (as cited in Mohammadzadeh, 2012, p. 121).

Many scholars believe that the acquisition of formulaic expressions is cumbersome for language learners (Chen & Lai, 2013). Native speakers regard learning formulaic expressions as a tough task, “let alone L2 learners” who have “limited language proficiency and cultural immersion” (Chen & Lai, 2013, p. 13). Besides as cited in Chen and Lai (2013), Cooper (1999) regarded the acquisition of formulaic expressions as a challenge and Kövecses and Szabó (1996) referred to it as an obstacle for language learners. Although no empirical evidence was provided, Jackendoff (1995) claimed that formulaic expressions outnumber the individual vocabularies of English language (as cited in Schmitt & Alali, 2012).

Thus it can be declared that English language learners need to be armed with a large number of formulaic expressions either to comprehend or to be comprehended in English contexts. The present study not only aims to focus on the acquisition of formulaic expressions which is both essential and problematic but it aims to analyze the effect of collaboration on the acquisition of idioms in comparison with the individual learning.

C. Collaboration in Pedagogy

Collaboration is a cross-disciplinary issue (Thomson, Perry & Miller, 2008) which can be used in other settings (Bradshaw, 1997) and can be traced in many fields of human activities as in the fields of organizational and management theory, microeconomics, linguistics, democratic theory, and especially education (Wood & Gray, 1991).

The effectiveness of learners' collaboration depends on learners' ability to work and solve language-related problems collaboratively (Nassaji & Tian, 2010). Thus it could be inferred that without a collaborative attitude towards task accomplishments, collaboration could be drifted away. According to Lin (2008) some scholars claimed that cultural (Triandis, 1972; Earley, 1989; Bierbrauer, Meyer & Wolfradt, 1994) or motivational (Kravitz & Martin, 1986; Zalesny & Ford, 1990; Harkins, 1987; Harkins & Szymanski, 1987, 1989; Kerr & Bruun, 1983) phenomena may well affect the product of collaboration.

Nevertheless the researchers suggest that collaboration may negatively affect the individuals' participation. They believe that the participants may reduce their effort in groups than when they do a task individually. Williams and Karau (1991) stipulated that some researchers (Harkins, 1987; Harkins & Szymanski, 1989; Kerr & Bruun, 1983) have defined this phenomenon as social loafing that is attributed to the "motivation loss in groups caused by reduced identifiability or evaluation" (p. 570).

D. The impact of Social Loafing on Collaboration

In collaborative tasks students interact socially thus some effective opportunities will be exploited -such as scaffolding and feedback- which are what the students do not experience in individual task accomplishment (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986, as cited in Nassaji & Tian, 2010).

The results of collaboration must be interpreted cautiously due to the fact that different factors such as motivation, culture, time, and context may affect the results (Tajeddin & Jabbarpour, 2014; Thomson et al., 2008).

Although no motivational theory could shed light on all complexities of social loafing, several theories, hypotheses, and models were discussed as the literature of social loafing (Knoke, 1988, 1990; Sheppard, 1993). They could be enumerated as the Williams and Karau's

(1993) "collective effort model" (as cited in Worchel, Rothgerber & Day, 2011, p. 2), the "Albanese and Van Fleet's (1985) free rider theory and Latané's (1981) social impact theory" (as cited in Lin, 2008, p. 10 &11), Williams and Karau's (1993) and "Sheppard and Taylor's (1999) expectancy theory, Kidwell and Bennet's (1993) comprehensive theory" (as cited in Liden, Wayne, Jaworski & Bennett, 2004, p. 286) and Williams and Karau's (1991) and Zajonc's (1965) social facilitation theory.

The abovementioned theories, hypotheses and models have a primary concept in common, they all illustrate how collaboration may affect the performance of individual learners negatively when individual learners feel inconvenient or decrease their effort in collaborative settings.

II. METHOD

A. Research question

The present study seeks to find answers to the following questions:

1. *Is there any significant difference between the group receiving group-work collaborative tasks and the group receiving individual output tasks in learning formulaic expressions at the level of comprehension?*
2. *Is there any significant difference between the group receiving group-work collaborative tasks and the group receiving individual output tasks in learning formulaic expressions at the level of production?*

B. Participants

The population of the study was consisted of 45 intermediate students selected from two intact groups form Iran English School. The participants were homogeneous regarding their gender and language proficiency. The students were between 16-25 year old and enjoyed intermediate level of proficiency. The level of the students was determined by a placement test which was suggested and administered by the institute

C. Design

The population of the present study was selected non-randomly. Therefore, the design of the current research is quasi-experimental. Best and Khan (2006) believe that a "convenience sample consists of those persons available for study. Educational researchers, because of administrative limitation in randomly selecting and assigning individuals to experimental and control group, often use convenience sample'' (p.18).

D. Instruments

Two instruments were used in the present study.

Placement Test. It was a test of four skills offered by the authors of the Summit book, namely the Saslow and Ascher (2006). The test was comprised of 60 multiple choice items, true and false, short answer, and essay questions with 90 minutes time limit. The Reliability of the placement test was assessed by KR-21 as .94.

Test of Formulaic Expressions. It was a researcher-made test utilized as the pre and posttests to measure the students' ability in comprehension and production of the target expressions. It was a list of 60 expressions comprised of two blank columns, which let the participants write the English definitions of the intended expressions in the first column and their own sentences including the idiomatic expressions in the second column. The data gained from the first column was considered to check the learners' comprehension and the second column was employed to measure the learners' ability to produce the intended formulaic expressions at sentence level. The reliability of this test was assessed through KR-21 reliability indices.

E. Procedure

Forty five intermediate-female students who were divided into two experimental groups were involved in the current study to examine the effect of individual and collaborative output tasks on the acquisition of 76 formulaic expressions. There were twelve instructional sessions and each session the same procedure was followed. Instructional sessions were held every other day and 3 sessions a week. The students studied the expressions every session through some passages which were extracted from the book entitled Basic Idioms in American English (Hurbert & Setzler, 1981).

The instructional treatments in the groups involved were similar considering the length of instructional period, the number of idiomatic expressions taught, the number of exposures to each individual idiom, the order of presenting comprehension and productive activities considering their level of difficulty, and the oral corrective feedback recommendations provided by the instructor during the instructional period.

It is worth mentioning that one of the researchers was the teacher who implemented the instructional procedures in both groups. She initially attempted to familiarize the learners of the groups with the benefits of collaboration by explaining its advantages and introducing it as a successful and beneficial technique for the purpose of learning. Then the newly learnt expressions were presented through three main stages, namely presentation, practice, and production.

1. The pretest was administered to both groups in the first session before being exposed to the target treatments and the allotted time was an hour.

2. The actual training of formulaic expressions commenced in the second session. The learners were initially involved in a pre-reading activity in the presentation phase. The pre-reading activity had two steps. First the students should think and discuss about some questions related to the passages in order to get familiar with the concept of the session. Then they should listen and trace the new passage while the teacher was reading the passage to the class. The students kept tracing the passage to the end then they were asked to guess the meaning of each expression individually in the first experimental group and in groups in the second experimental group. This step took about 8 minutes.

3. A matching activity was presented as the second activity which took about 3 minutes to be accomplished. The students were to extract the boldfaced formulaic expressions from the passage provided in each individual session. And then they were supposed to match them with the provided definitions. This activity was done as a complement after reading the passage to clear any clouds and to provide the chance of practice. Putting an end to this stage, the teacher wrote the newly learnt formulaic expressions on the board to provide the learners with the required data for the later steps.

4. The students were granted almost 3 to 4 minutes to memorize the equivalents which were provided in the previous activity. Then the teacher pointed at the idioms on the board and invited the students to recall and say the definitions of the idioms out loud. The task was intended to provide the learners with the chance of having oral practice.

5. For the purpose of written practice, the students were involved in the fill in the blank activity, and then went through the activity individually or in collaborative groups which lasted about 5 minutes. The participants in the collaborative groups received their peers' collaboration and feedback while the group of individuals could only receive teacher’s feedback whenever they needed. It is worth mentioning that the teacher monitored each group through each step and whenever the students were in need of help the teacher explained, defined, supported, and gave feedback in any of the groups.

6. As the last stage which did not exceed 10 minutes, the participants in both groups had to produce a short paragraph encompassing the idioms practiced during the instructional session while they were still on the board.

7. The post test was held at the end of the study to monitor any changes in the students' receptive and productive knowledge of the target idiomatic expressions. The allotted time was 60 minutes for both groups.

III. RESULTS

The descriptive statistics related to the impact of participation in two groups of individual and collaborative groups regarding acquisition of formulaic expression are presented in table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

		N	Range	Minimum	Maximm	Mean		Std. Deviation	Variance
Group		Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Statistic
group Learning	Pre Comp	24	14	1	15	6.75	.785	3.848	14.804
	Pre Production	24	10	1	11	6.50	.538	2.638	6.957
	Post Comp	24	31	11	42	26.38	1.945	9.527	90.766
	Post Production	24	20	7	27	17.96	1.255	6.147	37.781
	N	24							
Individual Learning	Pre Comp	21	12	3	15	7.29	.697	3.196	10.214
	Pre Production	21	12	2	14	6.29	.691	3.165	10.014
	Post Comp	21	39	17	56	40.43	2.773	12.707	161.457
	Post Production	21	15	20	35	26.86	1.255	4.893	23.929
	N	21							

The gained scores, differences between the pretests and posttests, were computed for comprehension and production tests. Then a MANOVA was run to investigate the two research questions.

Based on the results displayed in Table 2, it can be concluded that there was a significant difference between collaborative and individual learning groups' means of the gained scores on formulaic expressions at the level of comprehension ($F (1,43) = 19.82$, $p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .31$ representing a large effect size.

As shown in Table 2, it can be concluded that there was a significant difference between collaborative and individual learning groups' means on the gain scores of formulaic expressions at the level of production ($F (1,43) = 30.83$, $p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .41$ representing a large effect size.

Table 2. Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Source	Dependent Variable	Type III Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Group	Gained Comp	2046.604	1	2046.604	19.820	.000	.316
	Gained Prod	930.143	1	930.143	30.835	.000	.418
Error	Gained Comp	4440.196	43	103.260			
	Gained Prod	1297.101	43	30.165			
Total	Gained Comp	36751.00	45				
	Gained Prod	13335.00	45				

As displayed in Table 3, the individual learning group (M = 33.14, SE = 2.21) outperformed the collaborative learning group (M = 19.62, SE = 2.07) on formulaic expressions at the level of comprehension.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics

Dependent Variable	Group	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
				Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Gained Comp	Collaborative Learning	19.625	2.074	15.442	23.808
	Individual Learning	33.143	2.217	28.671	37.615
Gained Prod	Collaborative Learning	11.458	1.121	9.197	13.719
	Individual Learning	20.571	1.199	18.154	22.988

As displayed in Table 3, the individual learning group (M = 20.57, SE = 1.19) outperformed the collaborative learning group (M = 11.45, SE = 1.12) on formulaic expressions at the level of production.

A. Construct Validity

A factor analysis through the varimax rotation was carried out to probe the underlying construct of the pretests and posttests of comprehension and production. The SPSS extracted two factors which accounted for 79.63 percent of the total variance (Table 4).

Table 4. Total Variance Explained

Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	2.163	54.068	54.068	2.163	54.068	54.068	1.642	41.041	41.041
2	1.023	25.563	79.632	1.023	25.563	79.632	1.544	38.590	79.632
3	.463	11.585	91.216						
4	.351	8.784	100.000						

As displayed in Table 4, the posttests of production and comprehension loaded on the first factor while their pretests loaded on the second factor. These results might suggest that the type of treatment determined the constructs of the tests. While they had a different construct before the administration of the treatment, they acquired a new construct after the experimental phase of the study.

Table 5. Rotated Component Matrix

	Component	
	1	2
Post-Production	.882	
Post-Comprehension	.865	
Pre-Production		.914
Pre- Comprehension		.809

B. Placement Test

The reliability of the placement test was computed through the KR-21 as .94. The result is shown in Table 6.

Table 6. Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean		Variance	Kr-21
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	
PILOT	65	24	88	71.52	2.188	311.267	.94
Valid N (listwise)	65						

C. KMO Index

To ensure the adequacy of the sample size, the Keiser-Meyer-Olkin index was calculated. KMO index was probed to be equal .67, it indicates that the sample size is adequate. A minimum of 0.60 is required for a good factor analysis (Yamini & Rahimi, 2007, p. 138).

Table 7. KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.671
	Approx. Chi-Square	37.928
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Df	6
	Sig.	.000

V. CONCLUSION

In the present study, the learners' comprehension and production of some formulaic expressions were measured after being exposed to the target treatments focusing on the effect of individual and collaborative output tasks. The difference between each group's gain score was analyzed through MANOVA. The findings indicted that the comprehension and production indices were higher scores in the first group working on the target expressions individually; in other words, the individual group outperformed the collaborative group.

The pretest of comprehension revealed that the individual group gain was 7.2 while the collaborative group gain was 6.7. However the post test of comprehension revealed a significant result with the individual gain of 40 over the group gain of 26. It can be interpreted that the individual group performed better in the comprehension part of the test.

Moreover to the comprehension supremacy of the individual group, data revealed significant difference between the groups at the level of production. The pretest of production

revealed slight supremacy of collaborative group over the individual as they respectively gained 6.5 versus 6.2. However the post test of production manifested that the individual group outperformed the collaborative group. The individual group gain was interpreted as 26 and the collaborative group was 17.

The result of the present study is in conformity with the findings of the research conducted by Escudero et al. (2013) who investigated the effect of collaborative versus individual learning on the performance of the participants in online learning. The study resulted in the superiority of the individual group over the collaborative group. They claimed that some motivational factors as the tools, individuals' experience and their own tendency to win were influential in the result.

Although the findings of the current study are in contrast to Dobao's (2014) and Nassaji and Tian (2010)'s findings who studied the effect of number of participants, and task types either in groups of pair or dyads or individual, on the acquisition of a form of vocabulary. Dobao (2014) analyzed the effect of pair and dyad collaboration on the acquisition of lexical language-related episodes (LREs), however Nassaji and Tian (2010) analyzed the effect of individual and pair work on the acquisition of phrasal verbs. Both of the results were in favor of collaborative groups and larger sample size although Nassaji and Tian reported a slight difference.

The current study ascertained that the least inclined students of the individual group had been much more motivated to engage in task completion rather than the passive students of collaborative group. It can be claimed that the individuals were motivated more because they urged themselves to have a word to say at the response checking time while in collaborative groups a peer would be the speaker of the entire group.

The superiority of the individual group might be resulted from the type of feedback they received. Dobao (2014) asserted that in collaborative groups the students were less likely to retain the collaboratively re-constructed lexical solutions because they were more inclined to learn and memorize the solutions which were presented by the teacher.

In the present study the students of collaborative group were more eagerly engaged in doing the tasks although it did not result in their superiority to the individual group. Accordingly, it can be claimed that collaborative group work had not been a successful technique for teaching idioms in the present research.

Why the collaborative group was not statistically as successful as the individual group could be attributed to a motivational hypothesis named social loafing that refers to "the act in which an individual's performance is reduced compared to working alone" (Lin, 2008, p. 8). Obviously there are important factors that may negatively interfere with the process of collaboration which must be taken into consideration. Some researchers as Kim and McDonough (2008), Storch (2001b, 2002, 2004) and Watanabe and Swain (2007) have argued that the

students' attitude towards collaboration can be a determining factor in their participation (as cited in Dobao, 2014).

The results of the present study and some studies mentioned above could be interpreted through social facilitation theory, social comparison theory and social loafing hypothesis which are said to be the motivational rationales supporting such findings. The latter theories and hypothesis agree that collaboration have some negative effects and will influence samples differently under divergent situations. They are in line with the fact that collaboration may work or not work in different situations. Bingham (2003) declared "we should avoid labeling them (the result of collaboration) in terms of success or failure unless we are able to identify that the most important indicators consistently point in the same direction overtime and across different contexts" (as cited in Thomson et al., 2008, p. 103). According to Thomson et al. (2008) and Tajeddin and Jabbarpour (2014) the results of collaboration must be interpreted cautiously.

In sum, the individual group work appeared to be more successful in the present research although the collaborative group was more actively engaged in the tasks. It can be concluded that efficacy of collaboration is a controversial issue and needs to be interpreted judiciously since there are different factors that may not be equal even in the in line researches.

The findings of the present study can have significant implications for teachers in view of employing collaborative approaches for pedagogical purposes. Teachers must consider that the students' attitudes and perceptions towards collaborative tasks can greatly affect the results of collaboration and may manifest totally unanticipated results. Thus it can be concluded that the teachers should play more effective roles in the learning process through the provision of feedbacks. And they must consider the negative effects of social loafing.

The results obtained from the present study indicate that learners can gain difficult language categories like formulaic expressions successfully through appropriate instructional treatments when being involved in output tasks individually. It is worth mentioning that learners must know that they are responsible for their learning items even when collaborating with others. Syllabus and textbook designers can exploit the results of such studies to devise pedagogical activities for involving individual learners more actively. Providing appropriate activities for assigning distinctive responsibilities to individual learners may also bolster the result of collaboration.

It is suggested for the prospective researchers to discover the effects of social loafing that might influence any other aspects of teaching negatively, letting alone collaboration. Thus more researches must be conducted to identify and explore the approaches to cope with it. In terms of comparing collaborative with individual tasks, more researches are required to observe their effects on the acquisition and/or retention of idioms through immediate test and/or delayed posttest.

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