

Active Learning as an Approach to Fostering EFL Learners' Speaking Skills and Willingness to Communicate: A Mixed-methods Inquiry

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Abstract

Emerging as a novel instructional approach, Active Learning (AL) is predicated on paving the way for students to actively explore knowledge and reflect on the learning processes. Despite its robust theoretical foundations, AL has rarely been implemented by English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers in the Iranian context. A lion's share of this hesitation may be ascribed to the lack of strong empirical findings to underscore its advantages and disadvantages. To fill in this lacuna, this mixed-methods study inspected the effects of AL on fostering EFL learners' speaking skills (SSs) and willingness to communicate (WTC) in the Iranian context. For this purpose, a total of 87 intermediate EFL learners were selected using a convenience sampling method. They were homogenized through a Key English Test (KET) and randomly assigned to an experimental group (n = 26) and a control group (n = 25). Afterward, a pre-test, interventions (lasting 18 75-minute sessions held twice a week), and a post-test were administered. Then, eight participants who actively participated in the interventions were invited to a focus group interview to express their perceptions of and experiences with AL. The results of the independent samples t-tests documented that AL substantially contributed to fostering the participants' SSs and WTC on the post-test. Additionally, the qualitative findings of a thematic coding analysis yielded four overarching themes; facilitating knowledge construction, developing metacognitive awareness, promoting self-regulated learning, and fostering motivation. The findings provide a number of implications for pertinent stakeholders.

Keywords: Active learning, Speaking skills, Willingness to communicate, Thematic coding analysis, EFL learners

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INTRODUCTION

It is deemed that the primary purpose of second language (L2) education is paving the ground for L2 learners to use English fluently and accurately in communicative contexts. In many L2 learning settings, however, L2 learners frequently struggle to express themselves fluently in the target language. They may have a reasonable level of comprehension while listening or reading, and they may even be able to communicate in writing, but speaking skills pose many obstacles (Chang & Alhusna, 2022; Renandya & Nguyen, 2022). In accordance with this, speaking has been regarded as the most difficult language skill. It has also been rather neglected in the English language classroom (Arbain & Nur, 2017; Ekmekci, 2016; Lam, 2004; Liew & Abdul Aziz, 2022).

Drawing on this issue, enhancing speaking skills (SSs) and willingness to communicate (WTC) - the precursors to the development of communication skills - is quite essential because they have a significant impact on L2 learners' achievements (Kang, 2005; Kehing & Yunus, 2021; McCroskey & Baer, 1985; Pitura, 2021). L2 learners who have a high level of WTC look for opportunities to interact in English or engage in meaningful English communication. Needless to say, active engagement in meaningful communication is crucial for L2 learning because it boosts exposure to meaningful input and compels L2 learners to generate precise output (Lee, 2020).

Speaking involves interlocutors and can be seen as a productive skill (Simpson, 2011). However, it takes time for L2 learners to acquire these skills. Although L2 learning occurs through meaningful communication, L2 learners are deprived of required opportunities to speak in the English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts. Accordingly, L2 learning achievements are not fulfilling, largely due to the fact that L2 learners do not raise the required capabilities to actively seek out opportunities to interact in L2 (Darasawang & Reinders, 2021). Therefore, L2 teachers need assist L2 learners in overcoming the obstacles in order to acquire SSs and motivate

them to communicate in English. For this reason, L2 teachers should adopt effective instructional methods enhancing L2 participation and interaction in their classes. One of the promising and malleable approaches that can meet their educational needs is Active Learning (AL) (Shen & Xu, 2015). For instance, Gardner and Belland (2012) found that AL was beneficial to improving their students' learning in biology courses. Furthermore, in the domain of L2 learning, the use of AL was found to encourage L2 learners to promote their listening skills (Abdolrezapour, 2019).

AL is an approach in which L2 learners work independently in the classroom. It makes the way for L2 learners to freely participate in the classroom. Additionally, it moves them beyond their conventional roles as passive note-takers and listeners and empowers them to play a part actively in the classroom (Daouk et al., 2016). Because AL employs analytical thinking, problem-solving, and metacognitive activities is more beneficial than the conventional lecture-based instruction to boost L2 learning (Abdolrezapour, 2019; Freeman et al. 2014; Lund & Stains, 2015). Put is simply, the adopted activities engage L2 learners in constructing the intended knowledge and skills (Niemi, 2002; Niemi & Nevgi, 2014; Rotgans & Schmidt, 2011). As Silberman (1998) asserts, AL help L2 learner learn how they should talk to each other by planning, monitoring, reflecting, and evaluating the learning processes.

As the literature clearly demonstrates the significant role of interaction is fostering L2 learning (Ellis, 2015; Rezai, 2022), it seems that AL has high potential in creating such a rich interactive environment (Hussain, 2012). Despite this, it is bizarre to observe that inspecting the effectiveness of AL in fostering L2 learning has received scant attention in empirical studies in the EFL context. In response to this long-lasting gap, this study aimed to explore the effects of AL on fostering EFL learners' SSs and WTC using a mixed-methods design. The results of this study may contribute the theoretical foundations of SSs and WTC and offer a range of implications for the pertinent stakeholders. In a sense, the results of the present study may open up new avenues for EFL practitioners to consider

AL as a new approach to fostering L2 learning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Active Learning

Over the last decades, classroom pedagogy has evidenced a steady desire on the parts of EFL practitioners to replace knowledge transmission by knowledge construction and transformation. The former is predicated on passing knowledge on to L2 learners, but the latter rests on the assumption that L2 learners should be actively involved in constructing and transforming factual knowledge (i.e., declarative knowledge) into skills (i.e., procedural knowledge) (Shen & Xu, 2015). One of the instructional approaches which strictly sticks to this paradigm shift of knowledge is AL. The concept of AL emerged in science education and rapidly extended to the social sciences and humanities in the 1980s (Bonwell & Eison, 1991). In exact words, AL traces back to this often-cited insightful statement of Confucius (551-479 BC): “I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand”. It is defined as “providing opportunities for students to talk, listen, read, write, and reflect as they approach course content through problem-solving exercises, informal small groups, simulations, case studies, and other activities that require students to apply what they are learning” (Meyers & Jones, 1993, p. 6).

AL also gets its theoretical underpinnings from situated cognition theorists whose main pedagogical philosophy posits that instruction is most successful when situated inside a student's own knowledge and worldview. From this perspective, the culture and community of L2 learners play an important role in learning. Another theory that lends support to AL is the Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1987). According to Vygotsky's ‘zone of proximal development’ notion, students learn best when the new material offered is just beyond their current levels of abilities (Fern et al., 1995). AL seeks to optimize the combination of knowledge and abilities considering the fully developed abilities and the underdeveloped abilities by offering

contingent feedback by capable peers. It equips L2 learners with the metacognitive skills to successfully navigate the labyrinth of unknowns on their own. As it actively engages L2 learners in planning, monitoring, reflecting, and evaluation the learning processes, it does not lead to passive learning (Naithani, 2008). In other words, AL opens up valued opportunities for L2 learners by pushing them to learn by experiencing and cooperating with their classmates, to ponder upon their learning processes critically, to bolster their self-efficacy, motivation, and self-regulation, to move beyond memorizing and understanding levels of learning and reach applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating levels of learning, to shape positive attitudes toward learning, and to offer and get appropriate feedback (Abdolrezaipoor, 2019; Killian & Bastas, 2015).

AL posits that L2 learners should have remarkable impact on the learning processes allowing them “to focus on creating knowledge with an emphasis on skills, such as analytical thinking, problem-solving and metacognitive activities” (Demirci, 2017, p. 131). This, in turn, results in developing L2 learners’ thinking skills. As noted by Bates (2007), the fundamental tenet of AL is that all learning activities are not active, unless L2 learners actively engage in the educational processes. For a classroom to be an AL environment, L2 learners and teachers must work together in a way that is both dynamic and based on a shared idea of what it means to be accountable for teaching. In such an educational setting, L2 learners learn content knowledge, conceptual understanding, and language skills through a discovery-based approach to learning in which the student is not only involved in the activity but also with the purposes of the activity (Demirci, 2017). In this approach, L2 learners are accountable for discovering, constructing, and producing, and L2 teachers are a facilitator. AL pivots around scaffolding L2 learners to handle learning obligations and empower L2 teachers with decision-making and leadership.

Significance of Speaking Skills

Speaking skills are viewed as complicated skills because they “involve

dynamic interactions of cerebral, articulatory, and social processes” (Goh, 2016, p.145). As underscored by Chaney and Burk (1998), they entail using verbal and no-verbal symbols in different settings to construct and exchange meaning successfully. According to Rajendran and Yunus (2021), speaking skills are very sophisticated and productive skills demanding the use of multiple skills concurrently, which often develop at various rates. Among the four language skills, speaking skills are regarded as the most significant due to the increasing importance of communication skills. In actual fact, the demand for mastery of speaking skills has substantially increased in recent years (Nazara, 2011). Thus, developing speaking skills is of paramount importance in EFL/ESL classes. Nunan (1999) contends that L2 learning success is measured by the ability to carry on a conversation in the target language. Therefore, speaking is likely a priority for the majority of L2 learners (Florez, 1999). Additionally, speaking can support other language skills. Gass and Varonis (1994) found that oral interaction is a key part of how an L2 learner’s skills grow. Given the pivotal role of speaking skills, EFL teachers should adopt new instructional approaches that substantially foster them. One of the new instructional approaches that may meet such a valued purpose is AL.

Willingness to Communicate in L2 Learning

As an often-cited concept in the 'individual differences' domain of research in applied linguistics, WTC has received considerable attention in recent years (Ghahari & Piruznejad, 2016; Kang, 2005; MacIntyre et al., 1998; MacIntyre, 2007; MacIntyre & Legatto, 2011; Cameron, 2013). The present conceptualization of WTC roots in Burgoon’s "unwillingness to communicate" (Burgoon, 1976, p. 12); “predisposition toward verbal behavior” (Mortenson et al. 1977, p. 122) and "shyness" model (MacCroskey & Richmond, 1982, p. 130). Nowadays, it is widely accepted that WTC is not only an affective factor in L2 acquisition but also originates from an individual’s first language communication abilities (MacIntyre et

al., 2002). It was added that unwillingness to communicate is a personality feature and a trait-like predisposition that leads to a variety of L1 communication by individuals. Conversely, MacIntyre et al. (1998) construed WTC as not merely a trait-like variable and proposed situational variables, as well as psychological and trait-like predispositions influencing an individual tendency to interact in L2. They defined WTC as "a readiness to inter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or process using a second language" (p. 547). The emergence of WTC is highly entangled with the pivotal role of interaction in L2 development. Considering this point, it is reasonable to expect that the more WTC, the more interaction in L2, and accordingly, the more improved SSs. In close, by impacting the recurrence of interactions in L2, it substantially leads to the development of SSs (Yashima et al., 2004).

Studies on the Effectiveness of Active Learning

A few studies have explored the effectiveness of AL in the literature. We critically review some of them here to pave the ground for this study. In research done by Naderi and Ashraf (2013), the effects of AL on Iranian EFL learners' listening self-efficacy beliefs with respect to the role of gender were investigated. Their results indicated that AL contributed to developing the participants' listening self-efficacy beliefs. Additionally, their findings revealed that both genders were equally affected by the AL-based instruction. Agbatogun (2014) explored the effects of AL on English as a second language (ESL) learners' communicative competence compared with a lecture-based approach. The findings documented that the participants trained through AL outperformed the participants trained via a lecture-based approach concerning the gains in communicative competence.

Shen and Xu (2015) examined Chinese EFL learners' perceptions of the effectiveness of AL in fostering their vocabulary learning. They found that the participants expressed positive attitudes regarding the efficiency of AL in fostering their vocabulary because the lessons were well-organized

and the intended vocabulary was grouped for practice and instruction, as well as the intended vocabulary was presented in classroom tasks focusing on problem-solving and group-work practice and assessment tasks. Demirci (2017) looked into the contributions of AL compared with the conventional approaches to learning science in the Turkish context. The results uncovered that the participants instructed through AL outflanked the participants trained through the conventional approach on the post-test. Finally, Abdolrezapour (2019) investigated the effects of AL on improving EFL learners' listening comprehension in the Iranian context. She found that AL-based instruction was highly useful to bolster the participants' listening comprehension.

As implied by the aforementioned investigations, there are two limitations that merit special consideration. First, to date, no study has inspected the effects of AL on L2 learning using a mixed-methods design. Thus, the quantitative and qualitative aspects of the topic should be concurrently investigated. Second, the effects of AL on EFL learners' SSs and WTC have received scant attention. In response of these gaps, this research explored the effects of AL on Iranian EFL learners' SSs and WTC, adopting a mixed-methods design. To meet these purposes, the following research questions (RQ) were put forward:

1. Does AL foster Iranian EFL learners' speaking skills?
2. Does AL improve Iranian EFL learners' willingness to communicate?
3. In which ways do AL lead to developing Iranian EFL learners' speaking skills and willingness to communicate?

METHOD

Research Design

To conduct the present study, the researchers used a sequential exploratory design. That is, the researchers complemented the quantitative data with qualitative data to reach triangulation. As noted by Riazi (2016), in

triangulation, various data collection methods are used to shed light on different aspects of a topic under research. For the quantitative part, a total of 51 EFL that had been homogenized using the Key English test (KET) were randomly assigned into an experimental group (EC) and a control group (CG). A pre- and post-test, as well as interventions, were then administered. Regarding the qualitative part, eight EFL learners from the EG were invited to a focus group interview to express their perceptions of the effectiveness of AL in fostering their SKs and WTC. Overall, the researchers used the mixed-methods design to disclose the effects of AL on Iranian EFL learners' SSs and WTC.

Participants

The setting of this research was Iran Language Institute (ILI) in Borujed City, Iran. It is a non-profit language organization with many branches across the country wherein the EFL learners have to pay for tuition to learn English. The researchers used a convenience sampling method to select the participants. It is a non-probability sampling method used to select a sample of participants that is in line with the purposes of researchers. The participants ($n = 87$) were selected for this research because they were available to the researchers. As education system is single-gender in Iran, the learners were females aged 17 to 35. Their language proficiency level was intermediate, and they were learning English as a foreign language confined to the walls of ILI. The researchers homogenized them using KET and the participants whose scores fell between 1 standard deviation (SD) below and above the mean (M) score were selected for the main study. For the qualitative part, eight participants from the EG who had active participation in the intervention were selected.

Notable is that the interventions for the EG and the CG were done by the first researcher who had read extensively about the principles and procedures of AL. The researchers took some steps to meet the ethical requirements. First, the researchers obtained the consent of the ILI principle

in Borujerd City to conduct the study there. Second, the volunteer participants signed a consent form. Third, the University of Ayatollah Ozma Borujerdi's ethics committee monitored if the ethical requirements were met. Finally, the researchers ensured that their performances would be kept confidential and they would be updated on the final results.

Instruments

Some instruments were used to gather the required data. The first instrument entailed KET. The researchers adopted it to homogenize the participants' English language proficiency. The researchers administered the reading and writing parts owing to logistical limitations. In the reading part, the participants need to read different kinds of texts like magazines, newspaper, signs, and brochures and to answer 30 follow-up multiple-choice test items. In the writing part, there are two writing tasks in which the participants had to write about every day and educational topics one hundred words in length. The participants had 75 minutes to answer the reading and writing parts.

The second instrument included Preliminary English Test (PET). The researchers used to gauge the participants' SSs prior to and after the interventions. PET has been designed and validated by Cambridge English Language Assessment Center (2005). It is appropriate for intermediate students and assesses their abilities to communicate in English for everyday purposes such as studying and traveling. For two reasons, the researchers adopted PET in this study (Geranpayeh & Taylor, 2013). First, it measures adequately L2 learners' abilities to communicate in English for accomplishing practical tasks and handling real-life situations. Second, it gives a reliable measure of L2 learners' SSs. It is composed of four sections. The first section consisted of a general conversation with the first researcher. She encouraged the participants to give personal information about themselves, such as their daily routines, studies, and future ambitions. The second section is a collaborative task with the researcher. The

participants were invited to discuss the issues and decided what would be best in the situation. The third section was completed individually. The first researcher gave the participants one minute to describe a photograph. Finally, the part four entailed a discussion with the other participants. In Part 3 of the exam, the participants expressed their ideas regarding the topic related to the photos they were provided. It is worth mentioning that the scoring procedure was 10 scores for each section. Therefore, the participants' scores were calculated out of 40. To reduce the subjectivity effect, two well-experienced EFL were recruited to rate the participants' performances. The Cronbach Alpha value for the inter-rater reliability of the evaluation was 0.87, which was acceptable for the objectives of this study.

The third instrument entailed the Willingness to Communicate Questionnaire (WTCQ). Constructed and validated by MacIntyre et al. (2001) and, then, revalidated by Valadi et al. (2015) in the Iranian context, WTCQ was used to measure the participants' WTC before and after the interventions. It gauges four dimensions, including social support (e.g., "I would like to go abroad and learn more about foreign countries and cultures."), orientations for language learning (e.g., "learning English will be useful in getting a good job."), willingness to communicate outside the class (e.g., "I like talking to a friend while waiting in line."), and willingness to communicate inside the class (e.g., "I like speaking in a group about my summer vacation."). It contains 25 Likert scale items ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

It is worth noting that the researchers conducted a pilot study to measure the reliability and validity of KET and WTCQ. In doing so, first, they recruited a professional translator to translate WTCQ into Persian. Then, they administered them to 25 EFL learners who were similar to the participants of the main study concerning English language proficiency and gender. The results of internal consistency measured using Cronbach Alpha yielded $\alpha = 0.83$ for PET and $\alpha = 0.96$ for WTCQ, respectively. Afterward, they used the experts' judgment strategy to measure the validity of the instruments. To accomplish this, the researchers asked for feedback from

two professors of Applied Linguistics at Arak University. They confirmed that the instruments can meet the intended purposes of this research after applying their minor comments in terms of content and language.

The fourth instrument consisted of a Focus Group Interview (FGI). The researchers selected eight participants from EC who had active participation in the interventions. Prior to running the FGI, they signed a written consent form in Persian. With the permission of the principal of ILI, the FGI was administered in an empty class at an agreed time with all participants. After greeting and appreciating the participants' participation, the first researcher offered a brief introduction of the purposes of the FGI. Next, the discussion was started with this question: "What was your experience with active teaching?" In particular, the FGI centered around the participants' conceptions of and experiences with AL in fostering their SKs and WTC. As the interview went on, the first researcher encouraged the participants to take turns presenting their perceptions of AT and how it might have affected their SSs and WTC. The interview took around 2 hours. It should be noted that the FGI was conducted in Persian to let the participants express their perceptions with ease. Then, the researchers recruited a professional translator to translate the participants' words into English.

The new Interchange Level 2 Student's Book 2, developed by Richards et al. (1998), was the last instrument adopted in this research. It has been designed and developed for young-adult and adult English learners and is used widely around the world. Its authors have claimed that it is suitable for developing communicative competence as it focuses on accurate and fluent use of language skills and fosters grammatical competence, lexical competence, and functional skills. In the interventions, the first five units of the textbook were worked on due to the time restrictions. Notably, two qualified EFL teachers examined the textbook and confirmed its appropriateness for this research.

Data Collection Procedure

The researchers followed distinct procedures to conduct this study. In the first phase, the researchers administered PET and WTCQ to measure the SSs and WTC of the participants prior to interventions. The second step involved the presentation of the interventions. They lasted for 75-minute 18 sessions held twice a week as an extracurricular activity. For the EG, the teacher did her best to cultivate an atmosphere conducive to AL. To achieve this purpose, some strategies and techniques were devised based on a number of criteria, such as fostering critical thinking, being engaging, paving the way for discussions on a variety of topics, learning how to speak about a topic, and evaluating their own performances.

During the implementation of the speaking tasks, she did her best to engage the participants in the learner-centered classroom. She used different learning activities. One of the learning techniques was ‘modeling good speaking strategies.’ In each session, the instructor allocated around 5 minutes to illuminate the basic features of a good speaker and tried to implement them in front of the class by talking about a topic. It was emphasized, for instance, that in order to communicate fluently about a topic, students have to pay special attention to the pre-speaking portion of the task, where they have to acquire a thorough understanding of the issue and be familiar with its important phrases and vocabulary. Or, they need to check if their words are understandable for their interlocutors by checking their comprehension. Then, the participants were grouped up and encouraged to discuss a topic in front of the class while considering the characteristics of a good speaker. Another technique implemented in the classroom was ‘the muddiest point technique’.

In this task, first a demanding listing task which was beyond the level of the participants was played in the classroom. Next, the instructor encouraged them to write notes on the most confusing parts and discuss them with their partners. Then, the instructor checked all EFL learners’ responses and highlighted the most common points for further discussion.

Then, the participants were divided into groups to discuss the sections that pertained to them. The other task administered in the classroom was ‘questioning’. To apply it, the instructor played an audio file and encouraged the participants to generate some questions about its content. This technique was effective in helping the participants develop their SSs by being able to recognize the key points and concepts by putting them into appropriate words. ‘Summarizing’ was the other technique used during the intervention. In so doing, the instructor gave a reading passage to the participants to work on it in their groups. Afterward, they were asked to summarize the reading passage in front of the class. Their performances were scored based on the inclusion of key points and the avoidance of redundancies.

The next technique included ‘independent performance’. Sticking to the advice of Bjork et al. (2013), recommending that there is an urgent “need for self-initiated and self-managed learning” (p. 418), the instructor urged the participants to take the responsibility of their own learning by planning, monitoring, and evaluating their performances. To this end, the participants were asked to plan, monitor, and evaluate some speaking tasks entangled with their interests and English proficiency. As such, the participants were granted valuable opportunities to assess their own learning achievements and to test the effective strategies leading to more promising results. Afterward, she grouped up the participants to talk about their experiences. The last technique was ‘teamwork or peer-learning’. In doing so, the instructor grouped up the participants and wrote down some questions on the whiteboard related to a hot topic like the COVID-19 pandemic. Then, they were invited to answer the questions independently and then to discuss them in their groups to achieve a consensus. During the implementation of this technique, the instructor encouraged the participants to work together to detect their peers’ mistakes and offer appropriate feedback. Concerning CG, the instructor wrote down a topic on the whiteboard and asked the participants to talk about it in front of the classroom. Once one of the participants made a mistake, she offered a direct

feedback without any explanations. In the last step, the researchers administered PET and WTCQ to see if the participants' SSs and WTC had been substantially affected after the interventions.

Data Analysis

The researchers used both quantitative and qualitative procedures to analyze the collected data. Regarding the quantitative data, they adopted SPSS, version 23. First, they calculated the descriptive statistics, such as M and SD. Then, they ran two independent samples t-tests to disclose if there were any statistically significant differences between the EG and the CG concerning the gains of SSs and WTC. Concerning the qualitative gained data, the researchers used a thematic coding analysis. In exact words, the researchers followed the procedures recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006) to verify the recurring patterns and themes within the gained data. For this purpose, the first researcher read the participants' words as much as she could understand their meanings. Afterward, she tried to go through the participants' words to code the outstanding concepts and to identify and highlight the particular features.

She attempted to verify and emerge the recurring themes after coding the key concepts. Then, she identified the recurring themes by considering the outstanding concepts of the participants' words coded previously. Next, she extracted the prevalent themes considering the codes emerged from the gained data. Finally, the first researcher examined carefully the emerged themes and excerpts one more time, considering the relevant theoretical underpinnings. The reason for this was to make a correct interpretive judgment about the recurring themes and move beyond the description of the collected data. Of particular note is that the researchers assessed the reliability and validity of the obtained results. Regarding the former, they got the collected data analyzed by two coding analysts independently. The results of the inter-rater reliability measured through Cronbach Alpha yielded $\alpha = 0.89$, which was considered acceptable for this

research. Concerning the latter, the researchers utilized the member checking strategy. For this, the researchers had the participants check if there is a high level of correspondence between their intended meanings and the extracted themes and excerpts. Overall, they approved high correspondence between them.

RESULTS

Quantitative Results

The first research question explored if AL fostered the Iranian EFL learners' SSs. To answer this research question, the researchers used two independent samples t-tests. However, they checked if the assumptions for using them, such as normality and the equality of variances were met. For the former, they used a Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. Since the obtained value of Sig (0.32) was larger than the value of the significance level (0.05), they ensured that the normality assumption was not violated. Additionally, the results of Levene's test ($F(2, 49) = 0.1150, p > .05$) and ($F(2, 49) = 2.210, p > .05$) documented that the equality of variances assumption was also met. After ensuring that the required assumptions were met, they used an independent samples t-test to determine whether there was a statistically significant difference in SS gains between EG and CG on the pre-test. Table 1 presents the results of the descriptive statistics.

Table 1: Results of Descriptive Statistics of the Speaking Skills Pre-test

Groups		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
SSs	EG	26	10.03	2.89	.56
Pre-test	CG	25	9.44	2.56	.51

As Table 1 shows, M (10.03) and SD (2.89) for EG and M (9.44) and SD (2.56) for CG were obtained, respectively. As it is clear, there was not a big difference between the two groups concerning the gains in SSs on the pre-test. The researchers ran an independent samples t-test to verify if the

difference was statistically significant. Table 2 reports the results.

Table 2: Results of the Independent Samples T-test of the Speaking Skills Pre-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
SSs Pre-test	Equal variances assumed	.255	.616	.781	49	.439	.59846	.76672	-.94231	2.13924
	Equal variances not assumed			.781	48.700	.438	.59846	.76490	-.93891	2.13584

As shown in Table 2, the results ($t = 0.781$, $p = 0.05$) showed that there was no statistically significant difference between the two groups in terms of SS gains on the pre-test. After finishing the interventions, the researchers ran another independent samples t-test. Table 3 informs the results of the descriptive statistics.

Table 3: Results of Descriptive Statistics of the Speaking Skills Post-test

Groups		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
SSs Post-test	EG	26	32.34	4.97	.97
	CG	25	14.72	2.83	.56

As Table 3 displays, M (32.34) and SD (4.97) for EG and M (14.72) and SD (2.83) for CG were calculated, in turn. As it is evident, there was a big difference between the two groups' Ms. Afterward, the researchers adopted an independent samples t-test to disclose if this big difference was statistically significant, Table 4 reports the results.

Table 4: Results of the Independent Samples T-test of the Speaking Skills Post-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
SP	Equal	15.191	.000	15.46	49	.000	17.62615	1.13952	15.33621	19.91610
Post-	variances			8						
test	assumed									
	Equal			15.62	40.012	.000	17.62615	1.12797	15.34646	19.90585
	variances			6						
	not									
	assumed									

As Table 4 informs, the results ($t = 15.46$, $p < 0.05$) revealed that there was a statistically significant difference between EG and CG regarding the gains in SSs on the post-test. Furthermore, the results of eta square statistics (0.91) yielded a large effect size. That is, AL significantly led to fostering SSs among the participants of EG after the interventions.

The second research question inspected if AL improved the Iranian EFL learners' WTC. For this purpose, the researchers employed two independent samples t-tests. However, prior to running them, the researchers examined if normality assumption and equality of variances assumption were met. They ensured that the collected data were normally distributed because the results of a Kolmogorov-Smirnov test showed that the value of Sig (0.23) was greater than the value of the significance level (0.05). Besides, the results of the Levene's test ($F(2, 49) = 1.985$, $p > .05$) and ($F(2, 49) = 1.170$, $p > .05$) indicated that the equality of variances assumption was also fulfilled. After ensuring that the required assumptions were not violated, the researchers utilized an independent samples t-test. Table 5 informs the results of the descriptive statistics.

Table 5: Results of Descriptive Statistics of the Willingness to Communicate Pre-test

Groups		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
WTC	EG	26	7.53	1.94	.38
Pre-test	CG	25	7.40	2.17	.43

As Table 5 informs, M (7.53) and SD (1.94) for EG and M (7.40) and SD (2.17) for CG were gained, respectively. As it is clear, the difference between the two groups concerning the gains in WTC was not big on the pre-test. Therefore, the researcher used an independent samples t-test to disclose if this difference was statistically significant. Table 6 reports the results.

Table 6: Results of the Independent Samples T-test of the Willingness to Communicate Pre-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
WTCEqual variances assumed	.663	.419	.240	49	.812	.13846	.57775	-1.02258	1.29950
Pre-test Equal variances not assumed			.239	47.870	.812	.13846	.57907	-1.02592	1.30285

According to Table 6, the results ($t = 0.240$, $P.05$) showed that there was no statistically significant difference in WTC gains between EG and CG on the pre-test. After completing the interventions, they adopted another independent samples t-test. Table 7 informs the results of the descriptive statistics.

Table 7: Results of Descriptive Statistics of the Willingness to Communicate Post-test

Groups		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
WTC	EG	26	20.92	2.89	.56
Post-test	CG	25	10.84	1.90	.38

As Table 7 indicates, M (20.92) and SD (2.89) for EG and M (10.84) and SD (1.90) for CG were obtained, respectively. As it is obvious, the difference between the two groups' Ms was big. Thus, they employed an independent samples t-test to verify if this big difference was statistically significant. Table 7 reports the results.

Table 8: Results of the Independent Samples T-test of the Willingness to Communicate Post-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
WTC Post-test	4.769	.034	14.616	49	.000	10.08308	.68986	8.69676	11.46940
Equal variances assumed									
Equal variances not assumed			14.732	43.433	.000	10.08308	.68443	8.70320	11.46296

As Table 8 indicates, the results ($t = 14.61$, $p < 0.05$) demonstrated that there was a statistically significant difference between EG and CG concerning the gains in WTC on the post-test. Furthermore, the results of eta square statistics (0.85) yielded a large effect size. It means that the AL significantly led to fostering WTC among the participants of EG at the end of interventions.

Qualitative Results

The third research question concerned the ways in which AL led to developing the Iranian EFL learners' SSs and WTC. To answer this research question, the collected qualitative data were analyzed using a content analysis approach (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The results yielded four overarching themes: facilitating knowledge construction, developing metacognitive awareness, promoting self-regulated learning, and fostering motivation. They are detailed below.

Facilitating Knowledge Construction

The first recurring theme that received considerable attention from the participants was 'facilitating knowledge construction'. They stressed that AL had efficiently paved the ground for knowledge construction. The following excerpt expressed by Zeinab evidences this clearly:

In the class, we were involved actively with the educational materials through case studies, discussions, role plays, and problem solving. That is, we were able to consolidate the intended knowledge in our competence as we were given the opportunity to process the educational materials through thinking, problem solving, talking, and interacting. Thus, we got willing to communicate in English.

Corroborating with the former statement, Atefeh opined:

As I could apply acquired speaking skills in other situations, it was really beneficial to encode information and skills in my memory. I mean, since I could make connections between the new information and skills with the ones stored in my memory, I could efficiently organize them. Therefore, I could reach and use them easily in conversations.

Consistent with the previous statements, Zohreh remarked:

As I had opportunity to use English many times, I benefited from the

social interactions to test the grammatical rules I had already constructed. As I received feedback from the classroom, I could refine them and use them more efficiently in my speaking.

Developing Metacognitive Awareness

The other theme emerged from the collected data was ‘developing metacognitive awareness’. As Goh (2011) notes, metacognitive awareness is students’ awareness of their own thinking and strategies they use during learning. In this respect, Shirin quoted:

To take control of the learning tasks at hand, I had to carefully plan, monitor, and evaluate my learning processes. This helped me gain awareness of the learning processes required to do the learning task easily in the future. That is, I learned how I should start, continue, and finish the learning tasks as I know the learning processes.

Another point highlighted by the participants leading to raising their metacognitive awareness was the instructor’s timely feedback. In support of this, Bahar commented:

As I was offered many opportunities to experience learning, I made errors. To correct me, the instructor offered me feedback. It helped me gain understanding of the learning processes. That is, they could help me modify my thinking in subsequent performances.

Congruent with the previous statements, Leila note:

As we completed a learning task, the instructor pushed us to reflect on the learning processes. The reflection assisted me to gain clear picture of the processes involved in the completion of the learning task. Therefore, I learned how I can do the same tasks more willingly in other situations.

Promoting Self-regulated Learning

The next prominent theme extracted from the students' responses was 'promoting self-regulated learning'. According to Zimmerman and Schunk (2011), self-regulated learning makes students plan for the learning task, monitor their performances, and reflect upon the results. In simple terms, when students are self-regulated, they can set their goals, monitor their own learning, instruct themselves, and self-reinforce. In support of this, Zahra quoted:

During the instruction, I became a self-regulated learner. This was due to the fact that I played an active role in my learning and I was the major urgent in constructing speaking skills. Because I was responsible for my learning, I had to engage myself in thinking, solving problems, exploring, and creating. This all promoted my self-regulation learning.

Consistent with the previous statement, Simin remarked:

This approach was really useful to me. I mean, the instructor encouraged me to plan for my learning based on my needs and interests. Then, he urged me to monitor the completion of the learning task. And, finally, he asked me to reflect on the outcomes. Thus, I could self-regulate my speaking performance on the following occasions by repeating and adjusting this three-phase cycle.

In accord with the former statements, Malieh noted:

As I could plan, monitor, and evaluate my learning during the class, I could transfer my learning to other contexts. I mean, when I was out of the class, I could use my speaking abilities to meet my communication needs. This made me willing to find more opportunities to speak in English.

Fostering Motivation

‘Fostering motivation’ was the last theme extracted from the students’ words. The students emphasized that due to the positive effects of active teaching, their motivation has increased significantly. In that respect, Azam posited:

Instead of just focusing on remembering and understanding the linguistic structures, the instruction pushed me to improve my learning to higher levels, such as applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and creating. For example, I could generate new phrases and utterances attuned to the context to manage the conversation. As I could speak in English and convey my meaning to the interlocutors, I got motivated and willing to improve my speaking skills.

In accordance with the former statement, Elaheh quoted:

Being in the class was really interesting and motivating to me. As I was working on learning tasks actively, I made personal connections with them, leading to increasing my willingness to communicate and motivation to continue learning.

Conforming to the previous statements, Narges highlighted:

The instruction paved the ground for deep rather than surface learning. I mean, that I could consolidate my deep learning and this helped me apply and transfer it to new situations. This was really fruitful to welcome conversations in English.

In line with the former statements, Shirin commented:

I liked this way of instruction. Because my learning was not limited to remembering and understanding. I mean I was allowed to apply and analyze the linguistic structures making me motivated to speak more in English.

DISCUSSION

As pointed out above, the first research question inspected if AL led to fostering Iranian EFL learners' SSs. The obtained results demonstrated that EG receiving AL-based instruction outperformed the CG concerning the gains in SSs. That is, the findings indicated that AL created a rich learning setting in which the participants could substantially foster their SSs. Additionally, the second research question examined if AL led to improving Iranian EFL learners' WTC. The obtained findings documented that AL contributed to significantly improving their EC's WTC. It means that the participants trained through AL were more willing to communicate in English after the completion of the interventions. In line with the obtained results, it may be argued that as AL was built on the participants' previous experiences to construct the required SSs, it might have led to enhancing their WTC.

The third research question explored in which ways AL led to developing the Iranian EFL learners' SSs and WTC. The results of the thematic coding analysis yielded four overarching themes: facilitating knowledge construction, developing metacognitive awareness, promoting self-regulated learning, and fostering motivation. In other words, the participants expressed positive attitudes toward the effectiveness of AL in fostering their SSs and WTC. In consonance with the gained results, it may be argued that these positive attitudes are due to the outstanding advantages of AL. They approved that AL is useful to facilitate knowledge construction, to develop metacognitive awareness, promote self-regulated learning, and foster motivation.

The obtained findings are in line with those of the previous studies (e.g., Abdolrezapour, 2019; Naderi & Ashraf, 2013), reporting that AL was found effective to promote Iranian EFL learners' listening comprehension and listening self-efficacy beliefs. Moreover, the obtained results are in congruence with those of Agbatogun (2014), revealing that AL was useful to foster ESL learners' communicative competence. Additionally, the

qualitative findings lend credence to the results of Shen and Xu (2015). They found that due to the outstanding advantage of AL, having a well-organized lesson plan, the participants expressed positive attitudes toward using it to develop vocabulary. Finally, the results are consistent with those of Demirci (2017). They documented that the participants instructed through AL outperformed the participants trained via the conventional approaches concerning the gains in science learning.

The obtained results can be explained using Socio-Cultural Theory tenets (Vygotsky, 1978). That is, it may be argued that since AL could integrate the cognitive processes and emotional processes concurrently, it might have helped the participants foster their SSs and WTC. Additionally, aligned with this theory, it may be argued that AL might create a rich learning environment because the learning materials offered in the classroom were one level beyond the current level of abilities of the participants and they were scaffolded by their teachers and peers (Alavi et al., 2020; Azizi & Rezai, 2022). This, consequently, might have led to fostering their SSs and WTC. Moreover, along with Socio-Cultural Theory positing that students should receive congruent and contingent mediations for capable peers (Poehner & Yu, 2021; Rezai et al., 2022), this argument may be made that since the teacher offered appropriate mediations, she might have detected the participants' fully-developed abilities and underdeveloped abilities simultaneously. Accordingly, she might have guided their learning efficiently.

Another feasible reason for the gained findings may be linked with the view that as AL was a dynamic learning in which the participants could actively interact with their peers, the learning materials, the instructor, and the participants regardless of their abilities might be exclusively paid attention to (Abdolrezaipoor, 2019). Therefore, their learning needs and weaknesses were fulfilled adequately, leading to the enhancement of their SSs and WTC. Moreover, aligned with Rotgans and Schmidt Henk (2011), AL might have been found useful by the participants because it might have held them at the center of education and, accordingly, might have facilitated

their knowledge construction. Because they had to do the learning tasks creatively and critically, cooperate with their peers, learn by doing, understand their values and attitudes, give and take feedback, and reflect upon their learning processes. This all might have led to increasing the participants' motivation to improve their SSs and WTC.

Another line of discussion for the obtained results may be ascribed to Bloom's taxonomy (Adams, 2015). In line with this theory, it may be argued that in AL, knowledge was not constrained to memorizing and understanding of L2 structures. In other words, it may be argued that AL might create a rich learning environment wherein the participants were pushed to apply, analyze, evaluate, and create their own learning. As they had to uphold their types of learning, consequently, they might have improved their SSs and WTC. In other words, along with Rotgans and Schmidt Henk (2011), it may be argued that AL might have allowed EFL learners to focus on applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating knowledge. The participants could achieve higher levels of learning if they focused on problem-solving, analytical thinking, and metacognitive awareness. Such an outstanding advantage might have increased their WTC and, accordingly, might have improved their SSs (Demirci, 2017; Niemi & Nevgi, 2014).

Another probable justification of the gained findings may be attributed to this view that AL might focus on knowledge construction and transformation than knowledge transmission (Shen & Xu, 2015). That is, in contrast to the conventional approach focusing on transmitting knowledge to the participants, AL might actively engage the participants in transforming and constructing factual knowledge (i.e., declarative knowledge) to skills (i.e., procedural knowledge). Another possible reason for the findings may be linked with view that AL might include different kinds of learning, such as cooperative learning and guided, self-directed learning. That is, AL might create a learning setting in which the participants could make appropriate learning decisions with the help of the teacher (Hout-Wolters et al., 2000). Moreover, AL might make the learning cooperative by "organizing

classroom activities into social learning experiences in which students work in groups to complete tasks collectively based on the principles of positive interdependence, individual accountability, mutual interaction, and group decision making” (Shaaban & Ghaith, 2005, p. 25). This all, in turn, might have led to the improvement of the participants’ SSs and WTC.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The present study explored the effects of AL on fostering the Iranian EFL learners’ SSs and WTC from quantitative and qualitative perspectives. The quantitative findings evidenced that AL substantially contributed to the development of the participants’ SSs and WTC. The qualitative results yielded four overarching themes: ‘facilitating knowledge construction’, ‘developing metacognitive awareness’, ‘promoting self-regulated learning’, and ‘fostering motivation’. In accord with the obtained findings, it may be concluded that the implementation of AL can make EFL learners motivated, engaged, and self-regulated to achieve their educational objectives. In close, the gained findings might lead to the conclusion that AL can be incorporated in EFL classes to facilitate the development of SSs and WTC.

The gained findings may propose some implications for pertinent stakeholders. First, the education officials at the state-run schools and non-profit language institutes can benefit from the gained findings to hold pre-service and in-service workshops for EFL teachers. At these workshops, EFL teachers can gain a comprehensive understanding of the tenets of AL to incorporate it in their classes. Second, teacher trainers can take advantage of the obtained results to consider AL in their instructional programs. They can draw student-teachers’ attention to the principles and procedures of AL with the hope that they will implement it in their upcoming classes. Third, EFL teachers can use the attained findings to incorporate AL as an alternative approach in their classrooms. They should note that if they want to facilitate L2 learning in their classes, their learners should handle learning tasks critically and creatively, engage in cooperative learning, learn by

experiencing, give and receive feedback, and plan, monitor, and evaluate their own learning. Fourth, the attained results can be illuminating for material developers to design and develop learning materials considering the tenets of AL. For example, they have to ensure that learning materials foster EFL learners' problem-solving skills, analytical thinking, and metacognitive awareness. Last but not least, EFL learners can be beneficial of the achieved findings to focus on higher levels of learning, such as applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating. That is, instead of constraining the learning of L2 to memorizing and understanding, they should co-construct the required skills to use L2 structures in real communicative contexts.

Similar to any research study, this research suffered from some limitations, which could be considered as valued avenues for further research in the future. The first limitation was that the setting of this research was restricted to just one language institute. Therefore, more studies need to be conducted in other parts of the country to increase the external validity of the attained findings. The second limitation was that this research was cross-sectional and it could not disclose the effects of AL on SSs and WTC over a long period of time. Thus, interested researchers can carry out a longitudinal study. The third limitation was that this research adopted a FGI for the qualitative part. Therefore, future research can adopt other qualitative designs, such as microgenetic development analysis and observation to reveal how AL foster L2 learning.

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