



Does Teaching English Through a Methodology-Based Technique of Critical Friends Make Any Difference On Iranian Intermediate EFL Learners' Speaking Ability?

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Abstract: *Speaking ability is one of the major skills of English learning that is difficult to deal with and needs much attention and specific care. Since most of the students' needs and difficulties are treated by their teacher, it seems beyond the means of an only teacher to investigate all problems and deficiencies, and find proper solution for them. Besides the only teacher has limited knowledge and resources to deal with all upcoming difficulties, and when it is done, one cannot monitor his/her own actions towards the sufficiency of it. Accordingly, the purpose of this study was to see to what extent does the implication of the principles of critical friends' techniques, affect the speaking ability of Iranian intermediate EFL learners. Therefore, in study quasi-experimental study that used a pretest, treatment (critical friends' principles), and post-test, there was one control group (N= 25), and one experimental group (N=28) with both male and female young adult learners. The SPSS software was used to compute and analyze the amount of the treatments impact, and the independent t-test built up the core statistical analyses of the study. During the treatment phase, the principles of critical friends were implemented in order to have its results affect the students' learning, specifically their speaking ability which was the focus of the study. The findings of this study showed a significant difference between the experimental and control groups, proving the positive effect of using critical friends on improving students' speaking skills.*

Keywords: *Skill, Student, Foreign Language, Learning Technique.*

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Theoretical Background

Generally speaking, teachers play a key role in changes to teaching methodology and contribute to improvements in the quality of education, especially EFL teachers who have to meet the needs and standards of English as an international language. Several educators (such as Larsen-Freeman 2000; Nunan 2003) have called for reforms and changes in EFL teacher education in order to raise the quality of teaching and learning. It is believed that the poor quality of ELT is partly attributable to a lack of sound teacher training and teacher professional development. As a result, some models of teacher professional development have been introduced, among which is the Critical Friends Group (CFG) technique. This is a method where 'critical friends', as described by Andreu, Canos, et al., 2003) and (Bambino, 2002), who are colleagues from the same educational institution work to help each other.

According to Dunne and Honts (cited in Franzak 2002: 260), CFG is 'a practitioner-driven study group that reflects the growing trend for site-based professional development in which practitioners behave as managers' of their own learning'. Different research studies have suggested that teachers enjoy CFG (Bambino 2002; Franzak 2002; Andreu et al. 2003; McKenzie & Carr-Reardon 2003). However, with the

exception of the research by (Andreu et al. 2003.) at universities, most studies have been conducted in Western primary and secondary schools. The writers were not able to locate any research into CFG in Asian countries like Vietnam where the notion of organizing in-service development in the form of class observations, seminars, workshops, or even informal talks that give colleagues from the same working context the opportunity to exchange ideas and share experiences and innovations, seems uncommon (Pham, 2001).

Accordingly, this study tries focus on the techniques of the critical friends regarding its impact on speaking ability of the learners. Therefore, the main purpose of this study is to see, to what extent does the implication of the principles of critical friends' techniques affect the speaking ability of Iranian intermediate EFL learners.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

Speaking ability is one of the major skills of English learning that is difficult to deal with and needs much attention and specific care. Since most of the students' needs and difficulties are treated by their teacher, it seems beyond the means of an only teacher to investigate all problems and deficiencies, and find proper solution for them. Besides the only teacher has limited knowledge and resources to deal with all upcoming difficulties, and when it is done, one cannot monitor his/her own actions towards the sufficiency of it. When it comes to dealing with the previously mentioned problems regarding the speaking ability as an oral skill the problem becomes more significant and serious. Finally, there is no guaranty that learners can learn properly from the provided feedback, since the teacher himself does not receive it, and since there is no proper consultant with enough knowledge about the teacher's specific problem and context to refer.

This study tries focus on the techniques of the critical friends with an eye on the above-mentioned problem, regarding its impact on speaking ability of the learners.

1.3. Research Questions

To address the stated problems, and the purpose of the study, the following research question was raised.

Q: Does teaching English through a methodology-based technique of critical friends make any difference on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' speaking ability?

1.4. Research Hypotheses

Based on the above-mentioned research question, the following null hypothesis was made.

H₀: There is no significant effect of teaching English through a methodology-based technique of critical friends on Iranian intermediate EFL Learners' speaking ability.

2. Review of the Related Literature

2.1. Introduction

2.1.1. The history of Critical Friend (CF):

Critical Friend was first discussed by Stannous, when he recommended another person who could work with a teacher and give advice as a friend rather than a consultant; in order to develop the reflective abilities of the teacher who is conducting his/her own action research. By way of definition, Hatton and Smith (1995:41) say that critical friend is 'to engage with another person in a way which encourages talking with, questioning, and even conforming, the trusted other, in order to examine planning for teaching, implementation, and its evaluation; They argue that it can give voice to a teacher's thinking, while at the same time being heard in a sympathetic but constructively critical way. Critical Friend uses a professional literature and journal articles as a start to generate discussion, develop rapport and structure during the meeting (Thomas W. Miller.2007). (Cromwell, 1999) stated that "Additionally, when a structured teacher collaboration program is implemented, teachers are more thoughtful about connecting curriculum,

assessment, and instruction”.

Collaboration practices “Collaboration in schools breaks up the isolation of the classroom for educators as a result of the collaboration; educator felt more effective and receives a degree of satisfaction in their teaching” (Morton Inger, 1993).

Mentoring” Mentoring is a form of support that is being used more and more widely in English schools, and has been used extensively in other contexts beyond education, particularly business and sport. Mentor is a character in Homer’s Greek classic *Odyssey*, depicted as the wise and trusted counselor providing protection, guidance and support to Odysseus son Telemachus” (Costa et al., 2002).

Coaching “Teachers need support, coaches guide teachers. Coach role is “to apply specific strategies to enhance another person’s perceptions, decisions, and intellectual function” (Costa et al., 2002) (p. 21).

2.1.2 What Is a Critical Friend?

A critical friend can be defined as “a trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers critiques of a person’s work as a friend. A critical friend takes the time to fully understand the context of the work presented and the outcomes that the person or group is working toward. The friend is an advocate for the success of that work” (Costa, et al., 1993).

The role of the critical friend is therefore a strategy icon and can be important in assisting improvement. It is essentially a role of support and challenge. Critical friendship has also been described as less formal than mentoring or coaching and probably best described as “a professional relationship based on mutual regard and the willingness to question and challenge”. A critical friend can support, encourage and stretch you to become more effective in your role as a teacher and educator.

Benefits of CFG

CFG is believed to promote both teacher learning and student outcomes. For this reason, CFG is strongly advocated in the literature as an effective model of teacher professional development.

The National Union of Teachers (2004: 2), in the UK, maintains that a CFG puts teachers in control of their own professional development, allowing them to ‘start from where they are’, and further claims that it can be used by teachers throughout their careers and applied to any teaching and learning situation. In other words, CFG allows for flexibility and continuity and requires no resources other than time.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The participants’ description for this study is three fold the students, the teachers, and the raters. Since the study seeks to find the results of the efficacy of the implication of the treatments on the teachers’ side, as reflected on students’ performance, the first two groups are of greater importance.

3.2. Instrumentation

3.2.1. Preliminary English Test (PET):

A version of Preliminary English Test (PET, by Quintana, 2003) was used to homogenize the students and make sure the students were all in the same level of proficiency. For the speaking and writing sections of the test, two experienced raters rated and scored the tests and their inter-rater reliability was calculated.

3.2.2. Rating Scale of the PET Test:

The Pet’s scoring rubric was used for the scoring of the PET test, during the homogenization phase. The scores of the rubric were adapted with the speaking and writing skills ranging from 1 to 25.

3.2.3. Contextualized Speaking Assessment (COSA)

For the purpose of the pretest and posttest, the Contextualized Speaking Assessment (COSA) which is a speaking proficiency battery test (specified for intermediate levels) and is developed by Minnesota Language Proficiency Assessments (MLPA) was used. The COSA test is administered and rated online, and it takes about 20 minutes. Therefore, for the sake of administration of the test two laptop computers equipped with a headset and a microphone were also used in the language institute. In COSA, the student responses are saved as mp3 files on a secure server for the researcher's access to the students' responses, and the online rating of the tests by two certified raters.

3.2.4. Course-book:

The course-book that taught in the institute was *Top Notch 3* (by Saslow et al., 2006), and the speaking practices were also from the same book, but sometimes as it was needed the teachers would go beyond it and would not limit themselves to it.

3.2.5. Journal entries:

The teacher's in the critical friends group that were participating and observing their friends' classes (in the experimental group) developed and used kind of simple self-made check lists based on their own knowledge and expectations, consequently they would take notes from what they observed. The journal entries were the collaboratively kept notes, and the discussion results that the peers in each critical friends group had about their observations, classes, and teaching issues. The journal entries were written in a simple language in the form of descriptive diaries.

3.3. Procedure

At first, the process of the homogenization then, the explanation of the pretest, post-test, the materials that were used, context of the study, and the detailed description of the treatments that were implicated will follow it. Finally, it ends with an explanation on the data collection and statistical analysis.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Test of Normality

Prior to taking any other step, as mentioned before, the assumption of normality was taken into account. The assumption, delineated in this part, can be corroborated through the test of normality which is followed by some graphs in a bid to graphically illustrate whether the population taking part in all the tests including PET and Speaking is parametric or non-parametric.

4.1.1. Test of Normality for PET

The output shown in Table 4.1 offers the results of both the Kolmogorov-Smirnov (with the Lilliefors which both used to verify the early immersionist data differ statistically from a normal distribution or not.

Based on the below Table 4.1, both of the two foregoing tests set differs statistically from a normal distribution in experimental group (Kolmogorov-Smirnov=.033, Shapiro-Wilk= .027). As for the control group, Kolmogorov-Smirnov shows the same story with different percentage (p=.036), considering. All the same, Shapiro-Wilk indicates no significant difference in control group.

Table 4.1: Normality Test

Tests of Normality

	Control and Experimental Groups	Kolmogorov-Smirnov ^a		Shapiro-Wilk			
		Statistic	df	Statistic	df	Sig.	
PET Test used for homogenization purpose of two classes	Control Group	.171	28	.036	.949	28	.182
	Experimental Group	.169	29	.033	.918	29	.027

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

Correction) goodness-of-fit as well as the Shapiro–Wilk goodness of-fit test

4.2. Homogeneity Assumption

Another important assumption the researcher took the cognizance of was Homogeneity. Before conducting any treatment, the researcher endeavored to make sure of the homogeneity of groups and since learners in this study were intermediate level, PET was utilized for the selection of homogenous sample.

4.2.1. Homogeneity in PET

For meeting the homogeneity assumption between the groups, as their language proficiency were concerned, the proficiency test of PET given to all participants, so as to ascertain both the control and experimental groups are roughly at the same level. Through SPSS, Variance, Standard error of measurement, Skewedness, Z score and Mean of each group analyzed.

It is worthwhile to noting that, through the apparatus of homogenization no outlier removed in the long run.

Table 4.2 simply sketches out and summarizes the data driven out of the preliminary analysis by SPSS, providing an obvious picture of the standing situation of participants prior to conducting any treatment. Depicting a gist of how many cases are included in the study, the table 4.2 indicates, the number of participants in control and experimental group which is 28 and 29 accordingly. The output meanwhile shows that no case is missed, which is good.

Table 4.2: Case Processing Summary

Case Processing Summary

Control and Experimental Groups	Cases		
	Valid	Missing	Total

	N	Percent N	Percent N	Percent
PET Test used for Control Group	28	100.0%	0	.0%
Experimental Group	29	100.0%	0	.0%

Table 4.3 divided up by the two groups (a control and an experimental), illustrates the resulted descriptive statistics as follows: Control Group, mean = 54.35, sd =2.55; Experimental Group, mean = 54.51, sd = 2.33.

Table 4.3. Descriptive statistics, Homogeneity PET

Descriptive	Control and Experimental Groups		Statistic	Std. Error
	PET Test used for homogenization purpose of two classes	Control Group	Experimental Group	
	Mean	Mean	54.3571	2.48309
	95% Confidence Interval for Mean	Lower Bound	53.3659	
		Upper Bound	55.3484	
	5% Trimmed Mean		54.3413	
	Median		55.0000	
	Variance		6.534	
	Std. Deviation		2.55625	
	Minimum		50.00	
	Maximum		59.00	
	Range		9.00	
	Interquartile Range		3.75	
	Skewness		-.187	.441
	Kurtosis		-.634	.858
	Experimental Group	Mean	54.5172	2.43442
	95% Confidence Interval for Mean	Lower Bound	53.6274	
		Upper Bound	55.4071	
	5% Trimmed Mean		54.5575	
	Median		55.0000	
	Variance		5.473	
	Std. Deviation		2.33942	

Minimum	50.00
Maximum	58.00
Range	8.00
Interquartile Range	5.00
Skewness	-0.194 .434
Kurtosis	-1.277 .845

The following Table 4.4 under the title of Extreme values, divided up by the two groups of control and Experimental while each group in itself is split in two. The split line spotlights a number of cases in the upper level and pointing up some other in the lower one in each group. Regarding the table, the highest and lowest scores in Control group are 59 and 51 accordingly while this number is the experimental group is accordingly 58 and 52.

Table 4.4: Descriptive statistics, Homogeneity PET

Extreme Values

		Control and Experimental Groups		
			Case Number	Value
PET Test used for Control Group homogenization purpose of two classes	Highest	1	3	59.00
		2	10	59.00
		3	2	57.00
		4	5	57.00
		5	16	57.00
	Lowest	1	28	50.00
		2	18	50.00
		3	15	50.00
		4	20	51.00
		5	13	51.00
Experimental Group	Highest	1	35	58.00
		2	47	58.00
		3	32	57.00
		4	40	57.00
		5	42	57.00 ^a
	Lowest	1	44	50.00
		2	29	51.00
		3	53	52.00
		4	52	52.00
		5	50	52.00 ^b

a. Only a partial list of cases with the value 57.00 are shown in the table of upper extremes.

b. Only a partial list of cases with the value 52.00 are shown in the table of lower extremes.

4.2.2. Homogeneity in speaking

As it was mentioned earlier, regarding students' homogeneity in their speaking skills, the Levene's test in independent sample t-test used in this study to prove the two groups enjoyed the same level of speaking ability.

The following "Group Statistics", Table 4.5, shows the descriptive statistics of participants taking test of Prior to receiving any treatment. Based on the table, the resulted descriptive statistics are as follows: Control group mean = 19.10, sd = 1.28, N = 28; Experimental group mean = 19.20, sd = 1.20, N = 29.

Table 4.5. Group Statistics of Pre-test
Speaking Pretest

Group Statistics						
	Control and Experimental Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	
Speaking Pretest	Control Group	28	19.1071	1.28638	.24310	
	Experimental Group	29	19.2069	1.20651	.22404	

An independent-samples *t*-test, as table 4.6 indicates was run to compare the experimental and control groups' mean scores on pretest of speaking so as to prove the standing homogeneity between the groups prior to the main study.

An examination of the data ($t(55) = -.302, P=.61 > .05$) indicated no significant difference between the two groups. Thus, it can be concluded that the two foresaid groups are at the same level of speaking ability at this phase. Considering the output, the assumption of homogeneity of variances is also met meanwhile (Levene's $F = .254, P = .616 > .05$).

Table 4.6 Independent Sample *t*-test

Independent Samples Test	
Levene's Test for Equality of Variance	<i>s</i>
<i>t</i> -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
Speaking Pretest	Equal variances assumed	.254	.616	-	55	.764	-.09975	.33022	-.76153	.56202
	Equal variances not assumed			-	54.459	.764	-.09975	.33060	-.76243	.56292

4.3. Testing the research hypothesis

In this study, only one null hypothesis offered and what is following refers to the hows of rejecting it:

4.3.1. Testing the research hypothesis# 1

The sole proposed hypothesis in this study says Teaching English through a methodology-based technique of critical friends does not make any difference on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' speaking ability.

The offered line was tested based on the result gained through Independent Sample *t*-test, and in doing so, students Speaking skills through IETLS speaking skill evaluated in the posttest phase and obtained data was analyzed based on foregoing test (Independent Sample *t* test).

The significant differences reaped out of *t*-test was $p = .000$ and according to Cohen's guidelines for effect size (1992), the size for the difference between the two groups is large ($d = -1.52$) so we can reject the null hypothesis say the treatment does not have any effect on students Speaking skill.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Restatement of the Problem

This research aims mainly at reporting on any bearing the methodology-based technique of critical friends might have on students' speaking ability. To do so, such wanted possible effect through implementing different tests was appraised during the study and the hows of forwarding such process clarified in the next parts.

5.3. Summary of the Findings

For many years, the position of teachers in providing feedback to students draw gazes to itself, turning the role of classmate in this arena to the forgotten corners of researchers' and experts' minds. But more recently the topic came to the fore, gabbing many attentions as a result.

When performed correctly, at appropriate times, it has been found in previous literature, using the methodology-based technique of critical friends has positive bearing on language learning that the hows of it briefly explained in the previous parts.

Inspecting the effect of teaching the methodology-based technique of critical friends on students' speaking ability was the main object the present study pursued. To do so, participants of the research, as for their language proficiency, homogenized via taking PET test and regarding their speaking abilities, they were all homogenized by taking IELTS speaking test which its result analyzed through Independent sample *t*-test.

The participants were 57 Iranian intermediate EFL learners chosen based on convenient sampling for this quasi-experimental study. While one group (28 participants) practiced teaching the methodology-based technique of critical friends for improving their speech, the other group (29 participants) experienced only conventional teaching.

Shortly thereafter conducting the two strategies among the participants, the two groups were evaluated once more in their speaking skills through the same route of taking IETLS speaking test and analyzing the obtained result through Independent Sample *t*-test.

The gathered data through Posttest phase showed a significant difference ($P = .000$) between the two groups, rejecting the null-hypothesis presumes Teaching English through a methodology-based technique of critical friends does not make any difference on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' speaking ability.

To wrap it up, during this study, students showed interest in providing feedbacks for their friends, welcoming any comments from their peers regarding their speech in returns.

5.5. Suggestions for Further study

Notwithstanding the successful result witnessed in this paper, there stand quite a few areas that warrant continued investigation before teachers and researchers accept or reject the positive effect of using the methodology-based technique of critical friends on speaking ability. To enlarge on the standing reasons behind the aforementioned line, the following points should be taken into consideration:

1. With regard to generalization, the present investigation aimed at a number of Iranian intermediate EFL Learners and thus researchers should not turn a blind eye to other factors including other proficiency levels, geographical areas, gender, socioeconomic status and other issues in future investigations.

2. This study centered on the students' speaking ability. Given that, other proficiency skills can also be brought to the board in the upcoming studies.

3. On account of time limitations, the paramount factor of retention has not been touched upon in this paper and the longevity of the study results is unknown in this study. So, longer investigations are required to corroborate the durable effect of using the methodology-based technique of critical friends on uplifting speaking ability.

4. The effect of the methodology-based technique of critical friends on teachers' role and their duties in classroom is another search area this paper proffered.

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