The Effect of Teaching English through Critical Friends on 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, affects the speaking ability of Iranian intermediate EFL learners. Therefore, the study is quasi-experimental study that a pretest, treatment (critical friends' principles), and post-test were used concerning 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.

Key Words: English learners, Ability, Skill, 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, de Juana, Manresa, Rienda and Tari (2003) and Bambino (2002), are colleagues from the same educational institution work to help each other.

Rather, teachers in this context seem to work in isolation from one another. According to Gemmell (2003: 10), teachers who work in isolation often resort to familiar methods rather than approaching concerns from a problem-solving perspective in attempting to meet the diverse instructional needs of today's students.

Thus, it seems likely that there is a need for reform in teacher education at both the pre-service and in-service level. As such, greater efforts should be given to the education of teachers who will be expected to guide students' learning.

As described by Franzak (2002: 261), there are three types of CFG protocols. The first type involves looking at student work where a teacher brings a sample and presents it along with a focusing question. Members of the group then take turns describing and hypothesizing about the work while the presenting teacher takes notes. After several rounds of comments, the presenting teacher shares what she found useful in the conversation. Then, the group debriefs the entire process. The second type of CFG protocol, used for peer observation, involves two teachers using a predetermined format and focus for observing each other's teaching. The last type, problem solving protocols, opens with the presenter asking a question about a specific dilemma. Participants then ask probing questions and discuss the problem among themselves while the presenter takes notes until the discussion is finished, at which point the presenter shares what he or she heard that was useful or important for his or her dilemma. In this project, the sole focus is on the second type of CFG protocol, which involves peer observation; therefore, the term 'CFG' will hereafter refer exclusively to this type of CFG protocol.

Accordingly, this study tries to 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. Purpose and Significance of the Study

In order to address the problems, rose in this study and due to the importance of teachers' attention on their students' learning difficulties and its significance on students' different language learning skills specially on speaking, this study tried to focus on critical friend's technique to take advantage of it for the development of speaking ability of the learners. To do this, the principles of the targeted method of CF were implemented. The main reason for using this technique is to benefit from a friend's useful and technical comments, while the teacher is not aware and capable of dealing with all the problems. Besides, they can share and discuss their common issues regarding their classes, in a bigger society of intimate friends who are also expert teachers in the target context.

Accordingly, the main purpose of this study is to see, to what extent does the implication of the principles of critical friends' techniques on teacher's side, is mirrored on their students' learning development_ in specific, to what extent does it affect the speaking ability of Iranian intermediate EFL learners.

1.3. Research Questions

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

2. Review of the Related Literature

2.1. Critical Friends: A Process Built on Reflection

Collegial relationships, encouraging reflective practice, and rethinking leadership are specified zones that Critical Friends process concentrate on extending them. Cooperative adult learning is one of its important components, which is often not equivalent to established patterns in work environments. It also plays like a coming wave which causes the leaders to find themselves and train to work as independent units as is expected; authenticate as knowing all required information; and we have to take this into consideration that feeling like the continuation of professional learning does not play important role in the creation of an exciting, rich, learning environment; and we never forget that they are simply supervisors in the leadership role.

If the words "important" or necessary are used in the group, they will be considered as critical. Those who have used this process formerly realized that many leaders are awkward at being "critical." They have further found that instead of being careful when face problems, many leaders

are trained to talk around and avoid difficult issues. The Critical Friends process provides us with an opportunity both to request and feedback in a manner make reflective learning robust.

Background:

The critical friends' idea first renovated and turned into a model for collegial dialogue by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown university. Nowadays, it is running program verified by approximately 35,000 teachers, principals, and college professors in over 1,500 schools. On July 2000, the National School Reform Faculty program, moved to the Harmony School Education Center (HSEC) in Bloomington, Indiana which currently accommodates Critical Friends Groups and run different workshops for training of Critical Friends Coaches.

Satisfied with its source means from where it originates, the situations which use Critical Friends protocol for reflection of all their potentials are classified into three groups: (1) colleagues' observations; (2) examining of a teaching artifact using the Tuning Process; or (3) take Consultancy Process as a vital tool in consulting about an issue. Each activity in the Critical Friends group is made up of careful description elements, enforced thoughtful listening, and then questioning feedback – which would be taken into account as the basic elements of reflection. The feedback arises from the discussions being classified in these methods: "Warm" feedback that is composed of supportive, appreciative statements about the work presented; "Cool" or more distanced feedback possesses different manners to think about the work presented and/or raises questions; and "Hard" feedback challenges and extends the presenter's thinking and/or raises concerns. In general, this process employs the time limits and agrees upon purpose and norms which are effective in the interruptions reduction in discussion and the rush-to-comment approach that in our busy lives increases.

For each protocol, a same basic format for collegial dialogue has been allocated: facilitator overview; observations presentation, work or issue; clarification questions; feedback/discussion by participants (discussants); presenter reflection; interrogation of the process. The questions and issues that arise from the presenter's mind typically, comes from feelings of concern, from moments in the work without closure, and it mainly originates from this point that they have not been able to find a real solution through solitary thinking. The major concentration in our workshop is on Consultancy Process.

The three roles which are facilitator, presenter, and discussants are the foundation of the Critical Friends process: The group is variable in size from four to seven people.

Group Member Role description
Facilitator:

First of all, preview the process, even if everyone got familiar already. It always sets the time limits and precisely follow the time intervals. Typically, as it implies, it would participate in discussions but also it will stand by in looking for others who want to take part in conversations. Time running process slightly depends on participation. It also may put an end to one part early or develop the other component, but it will consider the need of time preserving. The rest of the discussants of roles, warm and cool feedback, and continuation of the topic as the presenter justified. It Leads to interrogate process and is careful about not making this part brief. It is careful during the interrogating process, not to slip back into the discussion.

Presenter: As implied from its definition, it prepares a topic for consultancy. It is clear about the specific questions that should be addressed. Unlike most discussions, it may raise this in your mind as the same for the others, the presenter does not take part in the group discussion. He/she should be outside the main circle of the group and does not maintain eye contact during the discussion, but rather takes notes and gauges what can be useful and what cannot. Later, the feedback that is helpful will be provided.

Discussants:

Pointing out to the topic and making the others along with the current issue is brought by the presenter and gives feedback that is from warm (positive) and cool (critical) types. The feedback should be given in a supportive tone and discussants should provide practical suggestions.

The "Consultancy" Process

One of the prominent tools lets colleagues share issues confidentially and look for suggestions for overcoming or managing them in an optimistic manner is Consultancy process. Consultancy prevents of limit or stifle existence which could put away the effective action in a way that colleagues shares ideas collaboratively around the obstacles and barriers.

If you pick out a smaller group, the process will appear effectively (4-7 people) where colleagues can feel comfortable in sharing complex issues. Presenters share a topic, and the individuals who are the permanent members of the Critical Friends group suggest "warm" and "cool" feedback, talking to each other and prevent participating the person who presented the issue. The presenter will be out of the discussion circle, listening, taking notes, and deciding play a vital role in his presentation.

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 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*, 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 students 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 list 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	Sig.	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 was given to all participants, so as to ascertain that 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 outliner 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 homogenization purpose of two classes	Control Group	28	100.0%	0	.0%	28	100.0%
(dimension 1)	Experimental Group	29	100.0%	0	.0%	29	100.0%

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	Mean	54.357	1.48309
		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	54.5172.43442	
	95% Confidence Interval for Mean — Lower Bound	53.6274	
	95% Confidence Interval for Mean — 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	-.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 points 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 homogenization purpose of two classes	Control Group	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 is shown in the table of upper extremes.
b. Only a partial list of cases with the value 52.00 is 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 that 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 Mean
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 Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Speaking Pretest	Equal variances assumed	.254	.616	-.302	55	.764	-.09975	.33022	-.76153	.56202
	Equal variances not assumed			-.302	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 were evaluated in the posttest phase and obtained data were 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. 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.

5.2. Implications of the Study

Regarding the reaped findings, the present study can proffer the following theoretical and pedagogical implications for second language learners and teachers.

5.2.1. Pedagogical Implication

The pedagogical implications of the obtained results are particularly relevant for those interested in language teaching and language planning. In this regard, the fact remains that teachers cannot be omnipresent in each spot of speaking classes so as to provide students with their feedbacks. Given that, they can bridge this gap by bringing the role of students and their helps to the board.

The first pedagogical implication the findings can have is therefore for teachers to raise their learners' awareness about the telling role of their classmates in providing a fertile ground to receive feedback about their speech.

The outcome also spurs foreign language teachers to resort to the methodology-based technique of critical friends in their classrooms in a bid to give this chance to their students so as to express themselves among their classmates in classrooms, getting help from them to make a move in this arena.

5.2.2. Theoretical Implications

Owing to its theoretical implications for L2 education, the role of peers and their assessment and critical viewpoints, is one of the most crucial topics tackled with a many researchers in the L2 acquisition field recently.

Theoretically, the results of this study pointed out that teaching speaking through the methodology-based technique of critical friends in classrooms, can be more fruitful comparing the conventional techniques of teachings.

Moreover, with the emergence of greater choices of teaching approaches, methods, techniques, and activities, comes an increased responsibility to select teaching strategies that will produce the desired outcomes in an efficient manner.

This study spotlighted a significant difference between the experimental and control groups thereafter the treatment, corroborating the positive effect of the methodology-based technique of critical friends on improving students' speaking skill as a result.

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