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Quantitative Action Research on Promoting Confidence in a Foreign Language Classroom

Implications for Second Language Teachers

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Abstract

Research has revealed that second language learners often seem passive and reticent in language classrooms. In the age of globalization, however, there is an urgent need for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers to enhance their reticent students' confidence to help them take part more actively in classroom oral activities. In line with this trend, the present study reports on action research on increasing the EFL students' confidence in speaking. A second aim was to find out about the beneficial consequences of doing action research for second language teachers in their specific classroom contexts. Participants involved in this study were 16 Iranian male university students who had participated in a general English classroom in a private English language institute. The students had an upper-intermediate level of English. In order to increase the students' confidence, 30 minutes of each session were devoted to interview technique during eight successive weeks. Insights into the students' confidence development were gained through quantitative analysis of their confidence questionnaire. The findings indicated that the students' confidence increased because of incorporating additional speaking activities into the classroom and encouraging them to collaborate with their peers. In addition, this study showed that action research has a great potential to help second language teachers become autonomous.

Keywords: reticent students, students' confidence, action research, EFL students, interview technique, confidence questionnaire, autonomous teachers.

Introduction

The researchers in the field of second/foreign language (L2) teaching believe that speaking skills are an important part of the curriculum in language teaching, and the ability to speak in a foreign language is at the very heart of what it means to be able to use a foreign language (Biggs & Moore, 1993; Ellis, 1988; Liu, 2001; Long & Porter, 1985; Tsou, 2005; Tsui, 1992; Van den Branden et al., 2009). This importance relies on two aspects. First, our personality, our self-image, our knowledge of the world, and our ability to reason and express our thoughts are all reflected in our spoken performance in a foreign language. Being able to speak to friends, colleagues, visitors, and even strangers, in their language or in a language which both speakers can understand, is surely the goal of very many L2 learners (Luoma, 2004). Second, the linkage between students' classroom participation and their academic

achievement is undeniable. Studies have shown that when students participate actively in class, their academic achievement seems to be higher than that of those who are passive in class. Krupa-Kwiatkowski (1998) summarized in her study that "interaction involves participation, personal engagement, and the taking of initiative in some way, activities that in turn are hypothesized to trigger cognitive processes conducive to language learning" (p. 133). The importance of the ability or perception of ability to speak should not therefore be underestimated by either teacher or pupil (Turner, 2010).

In my teaching experience, however, some of the students keep silent all the time in class. They don't want to speak English. Even when they know the answer to a simple question, they hesitate to open their mouths. Similarly, by way of interviews, observations, journals, and surveys, research has revealed that L2 learners often seem passive and reticent in language classrooms. Encouraging students to talk in a language classroom is thus a problem that most language teachers face (Tsui, 1996; White & Lightbown, 1984). With the advent of globalization, however, there is a pressing need for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers to help reticent students develop the skills and confidence needed to take an active role in oral classroom lessons (Liu & Jackson, 2009). Thus, although not extensively researched, reticence has been receiving increasing attention in the last decade due to the growing importance of oral proficiency in L2 learning situations (Chen, 2003; Flowerdew et al., 2000; Jackson, 2002, 2003; MacIntyre et al., 2001; Tong, 2010). Most of these studies have raised one main question: What accounts for this phenomenon?

Although not extensively researched, reticence has been receiving increasing attention in the last decade due to the growing importance of oral proficiency in L2 learning situations.

Researchers have discovered various reasons for this reluctance to speak in L2 classroom situations such as the following: fear of losing face (e.g., being laughed at); low proficiency in the target language; previous negative experiences with speaking in class; cultural beliefs about appropriate behavior in classroom contexts (e.g., showing respect to the teacher by being quiet); habits (e.g., becoming used to a passive role in the classroom); personality (e.g., introversion); and lack of confidence. Due to the fact that "little empirical work exists on variations in L2 self-confidence" (MacIntyre et al., 1998, p. 547), the aim in this paper is to look at this affective variable through doing action research and finding out whether encouraging students to collaborate with their peers in extra speaking activities incorporated into the classroom leads to a more active role on the part of learners and increases their self-confidence. Yet, another reason lies in the fact that confidence has been found to vary according to the context (Liu & Jackson, 2009). Since few, if any, studies have previously dealt with confidence in an Iranian L2 context, this paper is thus an attempt to add to our knowledge in the field of L2 teaching, taking this issue into account in an Iranian EFL classroom. Additionally, by focusing specifically on self-confidence, I am responding to a plea recently made by Dornyei (2003), asking L2 teacher-researchers to "focus on specific learning behaviors rather than general learning outcomes" (p. 28).

Why conduct action research for this study? Given that I sought to inform my own teaching practice with the research—particularly with my specific classroom context—it was clear that an action research project would be the most suitable for my purposes. It is more practical and user-friendly than research defined in traditional senses, and does not necessitate some essential features of the traditional research such as sizeable sample of participants or time

limitations. Wallace (1998) defines action research as "the systematic collection and analysis of data relating to the improvement of some aspect of professional practice" (p. 1). He claims that teachers of language should involve themselves in action research on the basis of the assertion that most teachers would like to develop their expertise progressively while they continue in their chosen occupation. Ferrance (2000) suggests action research be employed once a potential problem, such as the one in this study, has been identified in order to provide structure to the solution. On the whole, due to its less formal nature, teachers will find action research by far the easiest form of research to conduct (Salmani Nodoushan, 2009).

Literature review

Confidence in Second Language

Confidence, motivation, and language ability are often treated as distinct but related learning dimensions in the field of second language (Clement & Kruidenier, 1985). The literature widely holds that these concepts are directly related and impact each other, and that if one of the factors increases or decreases, the others will follow in a direct relationship. Yashima et al. (2004) claim, "Considering that students need to communicate in order to improve communicative skills and gain confidence, the researchers hope to postulate a circular and interactive model to show the dynamics of interest, motivation, learning, confidence, and communication" (p. 144). Thus, few, if any, attempts have been made to explore confidence in isolation, and this concept has largely been regarded as a corollary of other studies dealing with other affective variables such as anxiety or motivation. However, these studies are important since they have identified an association between self-confidence in language ability and other language-related phenomena.

Previous literature has established a strong relationship between confidence and motivation. For example, Clement et al. (1994) suggest that many variables are related to motivation, but specifically produced adequate evidence to show that self-confidence is a powerful and major motivational process in multicultural as well as monocultural societies. The researchers concluded that classroom activities and atmosphere played a role in promoting self-confidence, but another type of self-confidence (or lack thereof) could be the product of extracurricular acquaintance (both positive or negative) with the L2. Yashima (2002) examined 297 university students and found that learners who were more motivated to engage in English conversation due to their positive attitudes toward the international community possessed a high level of confidence compared to students who lacked such a motivation.

The evidence of a consistent association between low self-confidence and anxiety encourages a serious consideration of the role low self-confidence might play in students' experience of second language anxiety. Cheng et al. (1999) emphasize this specific role of self-confidence in second language learning and claim that their findings offer additional endorsement to many other quantitative and qualitative studies that have identified an association between low self-confidence in language ability and language-related anxiety. In their own words, "some anxious students in second language classes may be afflicted primarily by low self-confidence in speaking the target language" (Cheng et al., 1999, p. 436). MacIntyre et al. (1997) also hypothesize that, in the context of second language learning, students with low self-confidence might tend to underestimate their ability to learn a second language and have negative expectations about their performance, thereby feeling insecurity or anxiety in the face of the language learning tasks.

Many previous studies have shown that there is a direct relationship between students' confidence and their speaking behavior in L2. For example, Lai (1994) attempted to identify Hong Kong secondary students' level of confidence in using English and the factors leading to different confidence levels in oral participation in classrooms. The findings show that most of the subjects "felt a lack of confidence in using English as a means of communication in the classroom" (Lai, 1994, p. 122). In another study, MacIntyre et al. (1998) suggest that self-confidence significantly contributes to the learner's willingness to communicate in a foreign language. According to them, affective factors such as motivation, personality, intergroup climate, and self-confidence underlie willingness to communicate, and the factor of self-confidence—including overall self-confidence in L2 and situational self-confidence in communication—play an important role in determining the learner's willingness to communicate. Yashima et al. (2004) cite a study of high school students who traveled abroad to study English. Some students were not ready to communicate due to some factors, including lack of L2 confidence, and found themselves in an endless cycle: needing to communicate with native speakers to gain L2 confidence, but due to a lack of confidence, unable to initiate interactions.

Due to its negative effects, some researchers in their studies attempted to propose solutions for students' lack of confidence in L2 classrooms. A study conducted by Burden (2004) reveals that almost 70% of 289 university freshman surveyed felt unconfident speaking English. Burden (2004) thus suggests teachers use *cooperative* as opposed to *competitive* goal structures as a means of creating interdependencies between learners to increase their self-confidence. Ewald (2007) reports that only about half of the students in her study claimed to experience a relative level of confidence in their upper-level classes. She asserts "even more surprising is that, given their status as Spanish majors and minors, only 12 of the students [out of 21] reported they feel more confident now about their language ability than ever before" (Ewald, 2007, p. 127). She then suggests that teachers work actively to build upper-level students' confidence and self-perception. In other words, "when students do something correctly, tell them! Convince them that the challenge of learning to use a foreign language is not outside their grasp. Assure them that mistakes are normal and expected and that even through flawed participation they learn" (Ewald, 2007, p. 134). In another study, Tong (2010) contends that "in order to boost their confidence, a sufficient amount of time can be provided for students to organize their responses to teachers' questions or to formulate questions" (p. 250).

Action Research in Second Language

In recent years, applied linguists have focused their attention on L2 teacher education and practice (Lazaraton & Ishihara, 2005). Since the literature has tended to focus on teacher development far more than teacher training, classroom discourse has been a locus of interest for quite some time. For example, Edge (2005) argues that, at present, ELT teachers are no longer required to apply a particular theory or use a particular method in their teaching. Instead, they should be responsive and responsible for examining their teaching context to gain a deeper understanding of their own work. This process of open, continuing development creates an environment that caters to learning, collaboration, and growth. Richards and Farrell (2005) also make the distinction between teacher training and teacher development. They argue that the former deals with basic concepts, strategies, and methodology, and therefore aims at short-term and immediate goals, while the latter aims at helping teachers understand themselves and their teaching. Through reflective analysis of

teaching practices, examining beliefs, values and principles, sharing with colleagues, and keeping up-to-date with new trends and theories, they believe that teachers can engage in professional development. One of the themes that is prevalent in this strand of research in L2 includes action research (Bartels, 2002; Brown & Rodgers, 2002; Burton, 1997; Crookes & Chandler, 2001; McDonough, 2006; Smith, 2005; Thorne & Qiang, 1996).

Although definitions of action research vary, there are some typical features associated with it, which were summarized by Burns (1999) as follows:

1. Action research is contextual, small-scale, and localized. It identifies and investigates problems within a specific situation.

2. It is evaluative and reflective as it aims to bring about change and improvement in practice.

3. It is participatory as it provides for collaborative investigation by teams of colleagues, practitioners, and researchers.

4. Changes in practice are based on the collection of information or data which provides the impetus for change. (p. 30)

Wallace (1998) also sums up that the differences between action research and other more traditional types of research are in that action research "is very focused on individual or small-group professional practice and is not so concerned with making general statements. It is therefore more 'user-friendly' in that it may make little or no use of statistical techniques" (p. 18). Unlike ordinary research, which may investigate theoretical issues and topics considered important by scholars in the field, action research typically focuses on questions that emerge from a teacher's immediate classroom situation (Crookes, 1993); and unlike participatory action research, which emphasizes learner participation in identifying the topic to be researched, action research is often teacher defined and directed (Auerbach, 1994).

The process of action research, if conducted systematically and extensively, enables the construction of teacher-generated knowledge, thus empowering teachers as the creators and not just the holders of such knowledge.

The process of action research, if conducted systematically and extensively, enables the construction of teacher-generated knowledge, thus empowering teachers as the creators and not just the holders of such knowledge (Beattie, 1995; Johnson, 1996). However, more recent approaches to action research in L2 have emphasized its contribution to an individual teacher's professional self-development rather than its potential to initiate large-scale reform (Burns, 1999; Rainey, 2000). In other words, action research has been regarded favorably because it can help teachers develop in-depth perspectives about the process of teaching and learning (Lacorte & Krastel, 2002). In addition, action research can help L2 teachers recognize the importance of learning how to seek answers to their questions (Tedick & Walker, 1995), develop personal theories about L2 learning (Crookes, 1997), and redefine relationships among learners, teachers, and researchers in ways that enhance the effectiveness of their instructional practices (Nunan, 1992). Thus, since the issue of teacher development

has become central to the field of L2 teacher education (Edge, 2005; Richards & Farrell, 2005), action research has gained its reputation as a reliable tool to this end.

Problem and Aims of the Study

The problem I identified in my classroom was that most of my students were not active enough during the class and did not speak most of the time. Following informal talks with my students, I discovered that most of them had problems with speaking English. Investigating students' attitudes toward learning English, I asked the question: Which skill do you want to improve the most? I found that most of them wanted to improve speaking but they were not brave enough to express their ideas. In other words, they wanted to speak but they lacked *confidence* to speak. Language teachers often teach based on informal analyses of their learners' needs (Tarone & Yule, 1989), however, I thought that informal conversation was not enough to confirm that students lacked confidence in order to speak. So I decided to investigate students' attitudes toward speaking skill through collecting data from a needs analysis questionnaire (see Appendix A) I had designed for this purpose. The needs analysis revealed that most of the students were really interested in speaking but they had low confidence in speaking English. Further, the data showed that the students attributed their inability to speak English confidently to the lack of speaking experience and/or opportunities to engage in L2 conversation inside the classroom.

Thus, the key research question that forms the basis of the present investigation is: Can an L2 teacher enhance his/her students' confidence in speaking in the classroom by providing students with additional speaking materials and encouraging them to engage in pair/group work speaking activities? Yet, since I decided to use action research as a useful and reliable tool to answer this question, another purpose of this study is to find out: What are the beneficial consequences of doing action research, such as the one conducted in this study, for L2 teachers in their specific classroom contexts?

Methodology

Participants

Participants involved in this study were 16 university students at B.A. level from different fields of study (management, physics, law, and physical education). They were all male and were between 19 and 22 years old. They had participated in a general English classroom in a private English language institute in Babolsar, northern Iran. The students had an upper-intermediate level of English, as determined by their TOEFL test taken by the institute. They had two 120-minute language sessions per week over a 10-week semester.

Context

The participants in this study had a reasonable knowledge of English grammar but were reticent to speak or produce the target language. According to Jahangard (2007), one of the main reasons that contributes to the Iranian students' inability to speak English is that students' aural and oral skills are not emphasized in Iranian prescribed EFL textbooks, especially in high school. These skills are not tested in the university entrance examination, as well as in the final exams during the three years of senior high school and one year of pre-university education. Teachers put much less emphasis, if any, on oral drills and listening and speaking abilities than on reading, writing, grammar, and vocabulary. The main focus is to

make students pass tests and exams, and because productive abilities of students are not tested, most teachers then skip the oral drills in the prescribed books. Thus, it is not surprising to see that the participants in this study even at the university level lack the necessary skills to be able to use English communicatively (Farhady et al., 1994). They are the products of a deficient educational system that did not allow for active participation of the students in the classroom.

Materials

Many previous studies have shown that L2 students' lack of confidence is attributed to their lack of speaking practice. For example, Kubo (2009) claims that the lack of the opportunity to practice speaking is one of the main factors that results in lack of confidence in students. In other words, the students' lack of confidence may be attributed to the emphasis given to receptive language skills in classrooms (Biggs, 1994). Benson (1991) stated that students involved in his study had "the barest exposure to English", adding "given the students' minimal exposure to English, it is not surprising that they showed little confidence in their ability to handle…speaking skills" (p. 44). Schneider (2001) confirms the previous research and states that with limited opportunities for Japanese college students to practice speaking English, generally they do not possess the confidence to speak despite having studied the target language for six years or more.

In this way, since I wanted to increase the students' confidence in speaking, they had to have more opportunity to practice speaking together with their friends. Thus, I made use of one of the authorized books on speaking on the market in which activities were based on real-world events. *Speaking Extra* (Gammidge, 2004) is a resource book containing materials for supplementary classroom work. The book helps learners "to speak with confidence to carry out the most basic social transactions" (Gammidge, 2004, p. 7).

Procedure

The ordinary technique used in the book to engage students in speaking is "interview." In this technique, one learner is usually asked questions by one or several interviewers. Interviews were used to involve everyone in the activity and cover personal information, likes and dislikes, or interesting past experiences. During the interview activity, the learner being interviewed should add extra information to the answers to the questions, and the interviewers should use the information provided by the interviewee as basis for further questioning. As Meng (2009) asserts, "This strategy [technique] is useful for keeping a conversation going and is a worthwhile speaking activity" (p. 220).

I started incorporating extra speaking activities into the classroom from week 3 to the end of the semester (covering 16 sessions during 8 weeks). Thirty minutes of each session were devoted to extra speaking activities instead of story reading lectures in which the students were supposed to read short stories and then present them in front of the class. The short story presentation activity was prescribed by the institute and was supposed to increase the students' speaking proficiency. Needless to say, this substitution was approved by the supervisor of the institute and permission was already given by the manager.

Data Type

The present study used a confidence questionnaire in order to gain a rich understanding of the participants' confidence development and of the impact of the extracurricular speaking activities on that development. It is described in detail in the following section.

Confidence in Speaking Questionnaire.

Griffee (1997) designed the "Confidence in Speaking Questionnaire" for typical university students. It is one of the first published questionnaires specific to L2 confidence. Griffee's (1997) confidence construct is the product of his in-depth inquiry into the self-confidence variables. He shows that his questionnaire has satisfactory validity and reliability. Griffee (1997) hypothesized three aspects underlying confidence in speaking English: *ability*, *assurance*, and *willing engagement*. He defined ability as "a command of grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation," assurance as "a feeling of security and comfort in speaking English," and willing engagement as one who is "glad to speak English with native speakers of English" (p. 187). His questionnaire is based on these three aspects of confidence and it fits my research inquiry well, in that it has allowed me to broadly examine my students' sense of confidence.

At the beginning of the semester (week 3), I had students complete, with full anonymity, Griffee's (1997) *Confidence in Speaking English as a Foreign Language Questionnaire* (see Appendix B). I re-administered the questionnaire at the end of the semester (week 10) to see whether students' sense of confidence in speaking English had changed. The questionnaire consisted of 12 items, which elicited responses to statements, such as *I like speaking English,* or *I can speak English easily*. A 5-point Likert scale accompanied each item, requiring respondents to report degrees of agreement or disagreement. The quantitative analysis involved collating questionnaire results from the beginning and end of the semester, showing percentages of increases or decreases in confidence by mapping the Likert scale onto a percentage scale. All percentages refer to the number of students who (strongly) disagreed or (strongly) agreed with the statements (percentages were rounded to the nearest whole number).

Findings and Discussion

Results of Confidence Questionnaire

Findings of three sets of four questionnaire items are outlined below. The three sets are: *ability*, *assurance*, and *willing engagement* (aspects constituting Griffee's confidence construct). I first looked at the sets independently, comparing questionnaire results of the beginning and end of the semester, and defining the items in each set. I then looked collectively at the three sets to define which group of specific aspects of confidence had been most strengthened over the semester.

Ability.

In general, students reported feeling greater ability to speak English in week 10 than in week 3. Only 25% of the students agreed with the statement *I can be interviewed in English* (item 1), whereas 75% objected to this statement in week 3. The students' agreement with this statement increased to 69% at the end of the semester. Questionnaire item 4, *I can discuss in*

English with native speakers, reflects the second highest increase in confidence in this set (62%). Students' agreement with this statement increased from 19% in week 3 to 81% in week 10. It suggests that repeated success in giving opinions to non-native English speaking peers led to gains in confidence in giving opinions to native English speakers as well. Although only 19% of the students agreed with the statement *I can show an English speaking visitor around campus and answer questions* (item 7) at the beginning of the semester, they increased their agreement to 75% at the end of the semester. This is the third highest increase in this set, reflecting 56% increase. In response to questionnaire item 9, *I can give my opinion in English when talking to a native speaker*, students reported 76% increase in confidence (the highest increase in this set). They increased their agreement with this statement from 12% in week 3 to 88% in week 10. This particular finding suggests that regular, extensive pair/group work gave students the opportunity to voice their opinions with increased confidence even when talking to a native speaker. Based on the results, I argue that having provided regular opportunities to practice proper pair/group work speaking activities, and to converse freely, students experienced a greater sense of ability and confidence to speak English. Comparing the questionnaire results of week 10 with those of week 3, the average increase for the four items (items 1, 4, 7, and 9) in this set was 60%.

Assurance.

Generally, students reported a modest increase in assurance when speaking English. The lowest increase in this set belongs to item 3, *I like speaking English* (only 19% increase). The students' agreement with this statement was 69% at the beginning of the semester, and their agreement increased to 88% at the end of the semester. Since all of the students had enrolled in the private language institute based on their own will, without any external incentive, it is not far from reality to say that they were motivated enough before starting their study. Thus, this slight increase is plausible. The most salient item in this set was item 6, *I can speak English easily*. Results for this item indicate that students felt English was easier to speak by an average increase of 50%. Only 31% of the students felt they could speak English easily in week 3, but their positive feeling was increased to 81% in week 10. Item 11, *I will speak to a group of people in English*, revealed the third highest increase (44%) in confidence in this set. Only 19% of the students agreed with this statement at the beginning of the term, but 63% of them endorsed this statement at the end of the term. Results indicate that students felt two times more relaxed when speaking English, reporting a 50% increase in confidence for item 12, *I am relaxed when speaking English*. This positive feeling was increased from 25% in week 3 to 75% in week 10. Comparing questionnaire results of week 3 with week 10, students reported a 41% average increase in assurance for the items 3, 6, 11, and 12.

Willing engagement.

Just like *assurance*, students reported a modest increase in *willing engagement*. Half of the students showed a positive attitude toward the statement *I would like to study in an English speaking country* (item 2) at the beginning of the term. However, their positive attitude was increased to 75% at the end of the term. The average increase was 25%, the lowest in all four items in this set. Students, on average, reported feeling 31% more cheerful when speaking English, suggesting students associated extra speaking activities with pleasantness. In contrast with 38% of the students' agreement with the statement *When I speak English I feel cheerful* (item 5) at the beginning of the term, the students increased their agreement to 69% at the end of the term. This was the third highest average increase in this set. In response to questionnaire item 8, *I say something to other people in English every day*, results show that

most students say something to other people in English every day. The students increased their confidence to say something in English from 38% at the beginning of the term to 88% at the end of the term. The percentage of increase for this item (50%) is the second highest in this set, indicating that most students are willing to say something to other people in English, even when not engaged in course-related activities. Although pair/group work activities were done in one 30-minute sitting twice a week, most students still found opportunities to speak English every day, which suggests these activities gave them increased confidence to do just that. The highest average increase in this set (57%) belongs to item 10, *I look for chances to speak English*. Only 31% of the students agreed with this statement in week 3, but their agreement was increased to 88% in week 10. Overall, students felt more confident to participate in English speaking in week 10 than in week 3, reporting a 41% average increase in willingness to engage in English conversation for the items 2, 5, 8, and 10.

Overall questionnaire results.

In all three aspects (ability, assurance, and willing engagement), students reported feeling an average of 47% more confident at the end of the semester than the beginning. In order to get a more comprehensive picture of the results, I selected and analyzed the most and the least salient items from each of the three sets. From Set 1 (ability), I selected item 9 (*I can give my opinion in English when talking to a native speaker*); from Set 2 (assurance), I chose item 6 (*I can speak English easily*); and from Set 3 (willing engagement), I selected item 10 (*I look for chances to speak English*) as the most salient items due to their average increase. These three items, given their high average percentage of increased confidence (61%) suggest that due to regular practice of spoken English in pair/group work activities, students found English easier to speak.

In a similar way, I selected three of the least salient items in each set. From Set 1 (ability), I selected item 1 (*I can be interviewed in English*); from Set 2 (assurance), I chose item 3 (*I like speaking English*); and from Set 3 (willing engagement), I selected item 2 (*I would like to study in an English speaking country*) as the least salient items due to their average increase. The three items combined reflect a low 29% average increase in confidence. Students reported the least amount of increase in confidence (19%) for item 3. For item 1, students reported a 44% increase. For item 2, students reported a 25% average increase in confidence. These findings suggest that incorporating extra speaking activities into the classroom did little to foster increased confidence in being interviewed in English, nor did these activities stimulate a significant increase in confidence to study abroad. Additionally, the results indicate that extra speaking activities did little to increase the students' desire to speak English in general since most of them (69%) had a positive attitude toward speaking English before starting the study.

Looking at the results of week 3 and week 10 questionnaires, item 3 (*I like speaking English*) and item 2 (*I would like to study in an English speaking country*) received two of the lowest average increases (19% and 25%, respectively) of all 12 questionnaire items, suggesting that the higher the initial average confidence (69% and 50%, respectively), the lesser likelihood the average would change noticeably over a semester. Conversely, item 9 (*I can give my opinion in English when talking to a native speaker*) and item 10 (*I look for chances to speak English*) received two of the highest average increases (76% and 57%, respectively) of all 12 questionnaire items, suggesting that the lower the initial average confidence (12% and 31%, respectively), the more likelihood the average would change noticeably over a semester.

Implications for L2 Teachers

The second aim of this study has been to add to L2 teachers' knowledge about the positive role of action research in contemporary L2 teaching education. Based on my own personal experience gained through doing this action research and previous literature, it is my firm conviction that action research has a great potential to help L2 teachers become autonomous (Castle, 2006) in the following ways.

First, an awareness of action research and its assumptions is an important condition for teachers to become autonomous (Tinker Sachs, 2000). Many teachers associate research with academics and scientists, experiments and statistics. In a study by McNamara (2002), for example, teachers' notions of research included "professors undertaking tests and surveys and making reports" (p. 16). Shkedi (1998) also found that teachers' definitions of research commonly focused on quantitative tools, objectivity, hypotheses, representativeness, and generalizability. While these are central concepts in educational research, they do not on their own provide a suitable basis for understanding the particular assumptions about research, its purposes, and its methods that underpin specific classroom contexts. As Borg (2006) truly asserts, in teacher research, "the goal is often understanding rather than proof" (p. 23). This was exactly what I sought to achieve. Although I initially associated research with positivistic, hypothesis-testing, quantitative studies, which confirm the results of previous studies that examined teachers' beliefs about research, my overall perceptions of research eventually broadened to recognize the usefulness of small-scale, context-specific studies after doing this action research project. One benefit to this was that it made the research process and outcomes more meaningful to me by rooting these in the reality of my day-to-day practice. I had to rely on my own intuition and experience since traditional scientific knowledge did not seem to fit with the uniqueness of the situation in which I was teaching, due to the fact that the issue I was interested in had been found to vary according to the context (Liu & Jackson, 2009). Action research was one way of dealing with this because it drew on my specific situation and experience and could therefore generate findings that were meaningful to me. In this context I was thus made aware of an important feature—that the contributions to knowledge arising from action research and any generalizations are different from other conventional forms of research.

Second, doing action research provides L2 teachers with the knowledge and skill that can help them develop research skills required to become autonomous. Walker (1985) claims that as teaching has become increasingly professionalized and the management of educational organizations more systematized, so research has increasingly become something that teachers are expected to include in their repertoire of skills. However, although thoughtful teachers may possess certain skills they can exploit during research, such as observation skills, many have not received the research education (Borg, 2003) that equips them to effectively conceptualize and implement a piece of research. If the inquiry is to be soundly conducted and the findings effectively shared, teachers need to possess relevant research-related knowledge and skills. Many previous studies have shown that action research has the potential to increase the L2 teachers' research skills. For example, Thorne and Qiang (1996) reported in their study that the teachers who implemented action research projects improved research skills more than teachers who did not carry out their projects. In the same way, McDonough (2006), in his study on improving L2 teachers' perception of action research, concluded that:

> TAs [Teaching Assistants] who carried out action research projects as part of an elective seminar gained a broader understanding of research…and implemented new L2 teaching practices. Participating in action research gave the TAs a framework for systematically observing, evaluating, and reflecting on their L2 teaching practices. (p. 45)

In line with the previous research, the present action research study had the same impact on me. During the action research project I moved into an examination of various data collection techniques, including case studies, audio and video techniques, teacher and learner diaries, questionnaires, interviewing, and classroom observation sheets. I studied authentic examples of each type of data, with two aims: firstly, to find out what sort of material it is possible to collect from my own classroom, and what that material can reveal about the teaching and learning processes; and secondly, to equip myself with the skills necessary to construct my own data-collecting instruments (i.e., Appendix A).

Finally, action research gives teachers the knowledge and confidence to act as responsible professionals. This actively constructed knowledge is strongly linked to a constructivist notion of teacher autonomy in teaching. As Flake et al. (1995) claim, "By becoming researchers, teachers can take control of their classrooms and professional lives in ways that confound the traditional definition of teacher and offer proof that education can reform itself from within" (p. 407). In other words, research that teachers do on their own teaching is more likely to lead to immediate classroom change than is formal research that teachers are expected to consume and apply to practice (Richardson, 1994). There is growing evidence that teachers doing action research together in the same school or program make significant impacts on school change, student achievement, and the professional development of teachers participating in the research (King & Newmann, 2000; Loughran et al., 2002). Although these findings have been well documented in general education, the current literature in the L2 teaching profession has arrived at the same results. For example, Elyildirim and Ashton (2006) claim that action research can improve the current L2 teaching situation in terms of boosting teachers' professional development, teacher training, and presenting to an institution evidence of the need for change. In this way, I was eager to participate in this action research project for my own professional development. Professional development in this study involved a continuous procedure in a productive way to give me the opportunity to learn about the confidence, engage in collaborative dialogue with students about their lack of confidence, study instructional practices and methodologies related to this topic, and trouble shoot the specific problem. I feel that I am now better equipped to consciously reflect on the problems of my particular situation, and on the applicability of the theories I have learned. Questionnaires have been a particularly useful instrument in this respect; I became more aware of the students' needs and difficulties, and I was eager to seek solutions to meet their needs and resolve their problems. As a result, I am more confident about what to teach, how to teach, and why to teach in such a way. Through conducting this action research project, I had an opportunity to develop my professional autonomy, and to initiate a number of useful classroom activities and techniques which I would otherwise have been unlikely to attempt.

There is growing evidence that teachers doing action research together in the same school or program make significant impacts on school change, student achievement, and the professional development of teachers participating in the research.

Conclusion

This research project combined two areas in the L2 teaching profession—students' confidence in speaking English in EFL classrooms and teachers' practical, classroom-based action research—both of which have been recognized "as not only being of importance, but also as areas in which there is still much progress to be made" (Curtis, 2001, p. 69). Extra speaking activities were incorporated into the classroom to increase the students' performance in terms of pair/group work, and consequently, their confidence. The results showed that an instructional methodology stressing peer collaboration as a tool for increasing the ability of the students to speak is likely to result in confidence. The findings of this study also suggest that L2 instructors should seek ways to include students' collaboration in the subject language as part of their curriculum design to help them gain confidence in speaking English.

The final conclusion is that teachers need to assume the role of the researcher in their own classrooms. Before employing strategies to help students overcome L2 lack of confidence, practitioners should get to know their students and their attitudes toward oral production, to shed light on the reasons that underlie their low confidence and their unwillingness to engage in speaking activities. It is suggested that the *teacher as a researcher* approach is an invaluable tool. Such an approach, which brings together theory and practice, can have positive effects both on the professional development of L2 teachers and on students' learning processes such as confidence.

Limitations of the Study

The target population for this study was 16 university students in a private English language institute in northern Iran. Because of the small sample size, the results of the study cannot be generalized to other settings; however, the study fills a gap in the research by raising language teachers' awareness of infusing cooperative learning instruction into EFL classrooms. Future research on similar topics may need to include larger research samples and more locations because cooperative learning instruction is worthy of continued examination and application.

This action research was conducted during the course of one semester for a total of 8 weeks. Therefore, the researcher suggests that future researchers extend the time frame of the research to the long term, perhaps a full year, to explore more findings and the effects of cooperative learning instruction on students' EFL performance.

The results of this study show that students' confidence increased in cooperative settings. In other words, a positive correlation was identified between pair/group work activities and confidence; however, the current study did not delve into students' language learning performance, so future researchers with similar research topics may want to examine the relationship between cooperative learning and students' academic performance in EFL contexts.

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Appendix A

A Sample of Needs Analysis Questionnaire
(Adapted from Nunan, 1998; and Griffee, 1997)

Age: **Field of Study:**

1. Do you like to learn English by: □Reading □Writing □Listening □Speaking

2. Do you like to: □Study grammar □Learn new words □Practice conversation

3. Do you like to learn English by: □Cassettes □Games □Conversation □Studying English □Books □Watching T.V.

4. Do you like to learn by talking to friends in English? □Yes □No

5. Do you like to learn English words by: □Seeing them □Using them

6. Do you like to learn English with the whole class? □Yes □No

7. Do you like to learn English by talking in pairs? □Yes □No

8. Do you speak English out of the class? □Yes □No

9. Do you feel happy when you speak English? □Yes □No

10. Do you look for chances to speak English? □Yes □No

11. Do you have enough confidence to speak to a group of people in English? □Yes □No

12. Do you feel relaxed when you speak in English? □Yes □No

13. How do you learn best? □Alone □Pairs □Small group □Class □Outside class

14. What do you feel are the most important things for you to learn in:
    Short term:
    Long term:

Appendix B

Confidence in Speaking Questionnaire (Adopted from Griffee, 1997)

1. I can be interviewed in English.
   Strongly Agree Agree Undecided Disagree Strongly Disagree

2. I would like to study in an English speaking country.
   Strongly Agree Agree Undecided Disagree Strongly Disagree

3. I like speaking English.
   Strongly Agree Agree Undecided Disagree Strongly Disagree

4. I can discuss in English with native speakers.
   Strongly Agree Agree Undecided Disagree Strongly Disagree

5. When I speak English, I feel cheerful.
   Strongly Agree Agree Undecided Disagree Strongly Disagree

6. I can speak English easily.
   Strongly Agree Agree Undecided Disagree Strongly Disagree

7. I can show an English speaking visitor around the campus and answer questions.
   Strongly Agree Agree Undecided Disagree Strongly Disagree

8. I say something to other people in English every day.
   Strongly Agree Agree Undecided Disagree Strongly Disagree

9. I can give my opinion in English when talking to a native speaker.
   Strongly Agree Agree Undecided Disagree Strongly Disagree

10. I look for chances to speak English.
    Strongly Agree Agree Undecided Disagree Strongly Disagree

11. I will speak to a group of people in English.
    Strongly Agree Agree Undecided Disagree Strongly Disagree

12. I am relaxed when speaking English.
    Strongly Agree Agree Undecided Disagree Strongly Disagree