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Effect of Online Synchronous Discussion on ESL Learners' Classroom Speaking

Narke Pankaj
School of English Language Education,
The English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad (INDIA)
narkepankaj007@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

One common problem observed in ESL/EFL classes is that learners feel anxious to participate in the communicative activities in the class. A major reason for the problem might be the fear of making mistakes while speaking in English. An observation was made by the researcher (during a survey that was conducted before the study) which suggested that learners rarely get the opportunity to interact in English with their peers outside the classroom. The present study aims to investigate the effect of providing online communicative tasks through popular social media on ESL learners' participation in classroom communicative activities. The study was based on the assumption that as social media is one of the most preferred mediums of communication for learners; it could also be seen as a potential teaching/learning tool. The paper thus also discusses the added benefits of using blended learning method in ESL/EFL classroom. A study was conducted with 20 Non-Native Speakers of English (NNS) in India who are currently pursuing their degree in engineering. The subjects had to participate in multiple rounds of both online and offline discussions. Tools used to collect data included facebook messenger, communicative face to face tasks, semi-structured interview and classroom observation. The data collected during the intervention was analyzed using mixed method. The findings of the study stated that there is a positive effect of online synchronous discussion on ESL learners' participation in classroom communicative activities.

Keywords: Online synchronous discussion, face-to-face discussion, pre-task, ESL

Introduction

Learning through collaboration is a widely accepted phenomenon across all the educational disciplines. Similarly language learning also doesn't happen without practice. Unfortunately, the traditional methods of language teaching encourage learning language in isolation and do not offer enough autonomy to the learners. However, a majority of learners do not learn language individually. Therefore the best way out would be to put learners in collaborative activities where they get to interact with each other in order to achieve the goal. This provides suitable environment for the learners to learn a language, where there would be exchange of ideas, acceptance, refusals and modification of each other's hypotheses and consolidation of learning. In order to create such environment, the teacher has to play multiple roles including that of a motivator, facilitator, mentor, friend and a more knowledgeable others (Vygostky, 1978).

Usually in a class of fifty minutes where there are more than fifty students the teacher finds it difficult to bridge the gap between demand and supply. Giving individual attention, encouraging every student to participate and monitoring their performances becomes a challenging task for the teachers. As a result of this the teachers rely heavily on learners and assign homework which learners have to do individually. Most of it is in written form and content based. A survey was conducted to understand teachers'

perspectives on this. One of the major issues that came forth was learners' hesitation in participating in classroom activities. One teacher said "*Some of the students don't have the required knowledge to speak while some struggle with the language. Both these groups are initially hesitant to talk...*" This observation suggests that learners require help on both the sides; content as well as language. Lack of any one of these will result in their withdrawal from classroom processes. Another teacher said "*..too much of self-consciousness that often compromises on the students' fluency. This may have to do with a variety of factors-ranging from their consciousness about how they use grammar, whether they are making mistake while speaking, and even about their appearance.*" This example also shows that the learners are anxious about making mistakes and more than anything else, they are bothered about being observed by the peers. That automatically pushes them into their shell and keeps them away from participating in the classroom activities. This example also emphasizes on the dynamic role of the language teacher in directing learners towards language learning.

The present study therefore addresses the issue of less learners' participation by trying to fill the gap between time and space availability in the language classroom and increasing requirement of teacher attention (which is impractical) in large classes by using social media as the online communicative tool. Use of online tools for delivering collaborative tasks helps the teacher in bringing all the learners on a common platform where there is a lot of learner – learner interaction, and the teacher is able to monitor the activities and give common as well as individual feedback as per the requirement.

Research Questions
- Does the use of online synchronous discussion as pre-speaking task increase learners' classroom participation in classroom face to face discussion?
- What aspects of face-to-face speaking are benefitted by online synchronous pre-discussion tasks?

Theoretical Underpinnings
The concept of blended learning was first introduced in the corporate world and later it travelled to the field of education. However it cannot be said exactly when it was first used in the language learning context. As defined by Oliver and Trigwell (2005), blended learning is the integrated combination of traditional learning with web based approaches. In addition to the face to face learning in classroom, the use of synchronous and asynchronous tools shows better results in language learning. Another interpretation of the term blended learning is all kind of distance online learning or any learning with the mix of multiple approaches. A major characteristic feature of blended learning is the choice of appropriate medium for content delivery. Face to face tasks helps learners in developing their fluency whereas online tasks develop learners' critical thinking skills.

Collaborative learning as defined by Dillenbourg (1999) is "a situation where two or more people learn or attempt to learn something together". Online is one of the most effective and appropriate medium for giving collaborative tasks to learners. This promotes sufficient learner-learner interaction and also avoids other affective factors (instructors presence, anxiety of being observed etc.) that hinder learning process as in face to face classroom. Sociocultural theory of Vygotsky (1978) is a strong support to collaborative learning where learning is perceived as the process of socialization and acculturation through the interaction with 'more knowledgeable others'. Through scaffolding learners are motivated to reach the zone of proximal development which is slightly higher than their current level.

Moxley (1990), in order to explain the interrelationship between speech and writing proposes two theories named as 'Unidirectional Theory' and 'Multidirectional Theory'. He explained the essence of both the theories. In unidirectional theory speech determines the development of writing. In other words writing is simply a way of preserving speech and may be referred to metaphorically as "frozen speech". On the other hand the multidirectional approach maintains that writing also influences speech and there are other important influences in the development of writing. The multidirectional theory backs up online learning as it involves both writing and speaking in it. It shows possibility of integration of both these productive skills for better learning purpose.

Review of Literature

A number of studies have reported that the use of online collaborative tasks has helped English language learners in several ways. Berton et al (2005) assert the positive effect of online discussion on classroom interaction. Their research findings suggest that web can be used at postsecondary level as it humanizes the learning experience of learners by giving them their individual voices which is slightly difficult in traditional classroom. Another prominent study in the area by Dangler (2008) on 'classroom active learning complemented by online discussion', reported that online discussion sessions in his geography class helped the learners to participate more actively in the classroom face to face discussion. According to him online writing activity before speaking or discussion helps learners to consolidate and modify their knowledge. ".. by communicating in an online text based format, students have opportunity to check their vocabulary and sentence structures before posting it to the board" (Dangler, 2008). Online discussion also serves as a confidence booster for the non-native speakers and novice speakers of English and who are unsure of the syntax. Another benefit of the online discussion showed by the author in the findings of the study is that online discussion allowed non-native speakers of English to take more active part in classroom discussion. The learners also had greater opportunities to learn from each other.

Chapman, Storberg-Walker and Stone (2007) reported that online discussion promotes inclusive spirit of learning. If learners get positive response to their comments they feel encouraged to participate more. And also if some participants do not get enough attention by other members, the other participants feel replying to that peer a social obligation.

Presence of the instructor in the classroom sometimes becomes an affective factor for the less competent learners to participate in the classroom discussion. In such cases learners become conscious of making mistakes and to be on the safe side they do not take any chance by participating in any discussion. An, Shin, and Lim (2009) proposed online discussion as the solution to the problem. According to their study when the instructor's intervention was less, the learners responded to each other more frequently. Chen et al. (2009) tried out a study with the objective of observing student-student interaction in synchronous online discussion in teachers' professional development programme. Students' responses on online discussion were recorded which were mostly positive stating that synchronous online discussion helped them in sharing their teaching experiences. Adding to this it also provided them more social environment for learning as initially learner- learner interaction happened more on the social level.

Talking about the effect of synchronous online discussion on learners' achievement, Bliuc et al. reported in their study that the learners who participated deeply in both online and face to face discussions showed more achievement by exhibiting the instances of adding their own ideas, reflecting on the previous statements, thinking critically from larger perspective than others. Another study by Lin and Overbaugh (2007)

indicated that the students who had a choice between online synchronous and asynchronous discussion scored higher in cognitive achievement test (which included memorizing, comprehension, application etc.) than those who had no other choice but only asynchronous discussion. SerenaW. (2009) in her study observed a huge impact of online discussion on face to face discussion in terms of learners' collaborative learning and classroom participation. The learners in their diaries mentioned that they could learn from each other through the online feedback provided by their peers. The researcher recorded a consistent growth in learners' participation in face to face discussion throughout the study. The statistics reveal a huge growth from one student participating actively to 71% students participating in the last face to face discussion.

Methodology

The study was exploratory in nature which allowed the researcher to explore the answers for the research questions. The data was collected through different tools that were used in the study. The data was analyzed both qualitatively as well as quantitatively to triangulate the facts that were found after data analysis.

Participants

The study was conducted on 23 (10 female and 13 male) third year engineering students who had Telugu as their L1 and English as L2. The participants' age ranged from 18-20 and most of them had English as medium of instruction in their earlier education. However, the level of proficiency was not satisfactory as exposure to English was very limited and restricted to the classroom itself. The process adopted for sample selection was stratified random sampling in order to control the variable of online proficiency.

Tools

Learner background questionnaire and perception questionnaire were administered to understand learners' suitability for the study. An English language proficiency test was conducted to understand learners' proficiency in L2 which helped in categorizing students into three groups; Basic, Intermediate and Advanced. Facebook page and facebook chat were the key tools for data collection. Learners were grouped on facebook chat for online synchronous discussion. The reason for choosing facebook chat as the tool for online discussion was its easy accessibility for the students as most of them owned smartphones. Group discussion tasks were given as the vehicle for speech production. At the end of the process of data collection semi-structured interviews were conducted in order to understand participants self -reflection on their own performance before and after the study.

Procedure

As there were several variables to consider in learners' performance, their familiarity and proficiency in the use of social media (SM) was the controlled variable so the learners who were poor at the use of social media were ruled out. However, the criterion for L2 proficiency was flexible and learners with high SM and low L2 proficiency were included. Simultaneously learners with high SM and high L2 proficiency were also included. In the initial phase of data collection learner background questionnaire was administered in order to know their L2 background and SM proficiency. Most of the students responded positively to SM proficiency checklist which made their entry in the study easier. Later selected learners were given an L2 proficiency test (used in English Proficiency Course for the students above 16, EFLU) with some required modifications. After the test the participants were divided into three categories of proficiency; low,

intermediate and advanced. This was done to show the effect of online synchronous discussion on learners' classroom participation and speech performance across the proficiency levels. Group discussion tasks were chosen as the vehicle for speech production as it is one of the important components in third year engineering English syllabus and also students find it important as it counts in campus recruitment after the course.

The study lasted for ten weeks with six rounds of online synchronous discussion and seven rounds of classroom face to face (F2F) discussion. The first F2F discussion was not preceded by an online discussion but a routinely employed individual writing activity on a topic which was on the same theme that of F2F discussion. The second F2F discussion was preceded by the first online synchronous discussion. There was thematic similarity in the topics for online and F2F discussion but the scope of F2F discussion topics was wider than online synchronous discussion. The rationale for this was to activate learners' thinking process for F2F discussion so that in F2F discussion learners can focus more on language than content. After every round of online synchronous discussion and F2F discussion the participants were shuffled in order to avoid the effect of 'feeling of comfort' with certain people of their performance. In the initial 4 rounds of F2F discussion there was no time limit for discussion but in the last two rounds there was time limit of 10 minutes for each discussion. The purpose was to encourage the learners to be more precise and structured in terms of language. Also the groups were formed for mixed ability (from all three proficiency levels) to avoid break downs during discussion due to less ability. Towards the end of all the online synchronous discussion rounds and F2F discussion rounds, a round of one on one semi-structured interview was conducted. The objective was to record learners' perception of effect of online synchronous discussion on their classroom participation and speech performance. The entire data was audio and video recorded, which was later transcribed and analyzed.

Data Analysis

Learners' classroom performance was scored by calculating the number of turns and time taken by an individual participant as against the entire group. A 'turn' is referred as the unit of speech produced by an individual participant in one initiation till another participant interrupts or takes over. While calculating the individual speech time the long pauses over 20 seconds were marked (Perfetti, 2011). However the pauses between the speech productions of two different participants were ignored as it was difficult to decide which participant d they attribute to. Another measure that was adopted to see learners' performance in terms of meaningfulness was the number of meaningful chunks (MFC) produced by the participants in one turn and then in the entire discussion. In this case the chunks which did not contribute to the discussion or those which were left incomplete were counted as non-meaningful chunks (NMFC). The chunks that were repeated immediately were also not counted twice as they were a part of participants' repair strategy. Learners' interviews were analyzed qualitatively to see their perception about the online discussion task and its effect on their speech. They were asked to express their opinions about the effect of online discussion on their routine classroom speaking performance.

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Results

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All the data collected through different tools enabled the researcher to answer the research questions that were set to direct the study in a proper direction. A positive effect of online synchronous communication was observed on all three proficiency level learners. The first research question was answered positively after the data analysis. In all

three figures below, P1 and P2 are high proficiency, P3 and P4 are intermediate proficiency and P5 and P6 are the low proficiency participants. Every alternate round of online synchronous discussion and classroom F2F discussion was considered for the data analysis. Six participants' data was analyzed as representatives of all three proficiency levels.

Figure no. 1 indicates the number of turns taken by each participant in different rounds. Figure no. 2 indicates the number of meaningful language chunks produced by each participant in his/her talk time (time taken by an individual participant in the entire discussion). Figure no. 3 shows the range of time taken by an individual participant in the entire discussion time across the rounds.

In the first figure the graphs show mixed results as the time variable in the F2F discussion in the last two rounds was controlled. As mentioned in the procedure section out of seven rounds of F2F discussions, in the first four rounds learners were not given any time limit. Whereas in the last three rounds there was time limit of 10-12 minutes for each discussion. The groups were comprised 4-5 participants from different L2 proficiency levels. The rationale for giving time limit in the later rounds was to make learners' responses more structured and precise without many repetitions. As showed in the first figure, the participants who took very less number of turns in the initial rounds, show increase in the later rounds. In contrast with this, the participants who took maximum turns in the initial rounds (close to 70% individually) decreased to an average number in the later rounds in the later rounds. The results show that the high proficiency learners were more active in the initial rounds of the discussion. However, with the increasing exposure to online discussion participants with low L2 proficiency became more active and their participation in the F2F discussion increased. The graphs in the first figure also suggest that lower proficiency participants gathered confidence from online discussion to participate in F2F discussion and shared equal responsibilities of the tasks given.
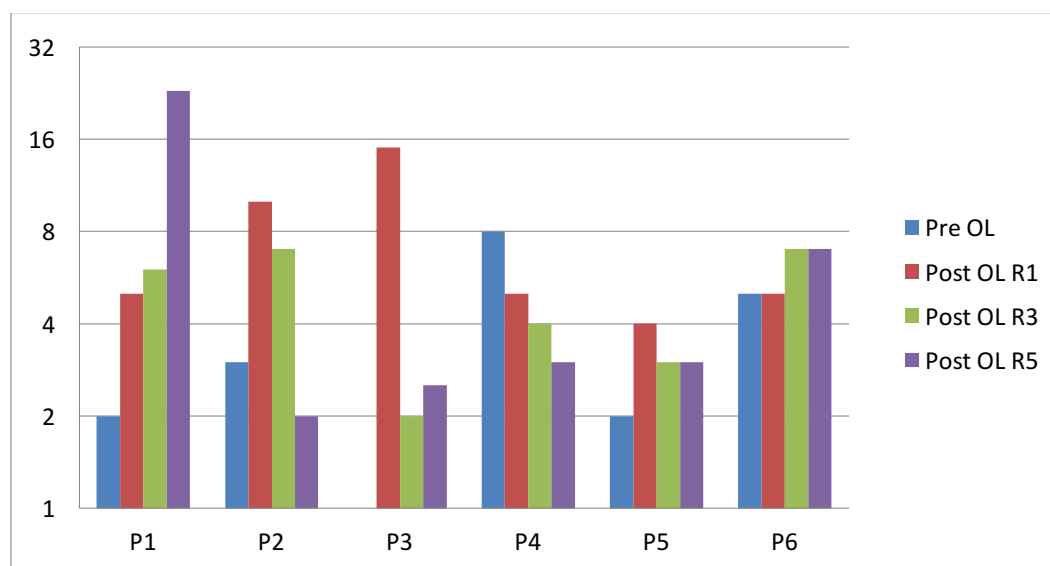

Figure 1. Number of turns taken by the learners across rounds

Comparing this with the second figure, though there was decrease in participants' turns in the later rounds (fig. 1), their production of meaningful language chunks in their speech increased remarkably. In figure no. 2 below a constant increase in the production of meaningful utterances can be observed.

Another observation of the data enabled the researcher answering the second research question by showing the effect of online synchronous discussion on learners' language that they produced while performing the F2F discussion tasks.

R1: P1: "*aaa… we are here to discuss on a uniform must be there in every engineering college. I think that aaa.. uniform must be there in every engineering college **so that** a every college can be aa will be distinguished by their college dress whatever it may be.*"

R3: P1: "*Good afternoon everyone. **As** the topic is reservation help women in accomplishing the empowerment. I really feel that reservations will help in that. As we see our govt. is providing 40% of reservation for women, aaa in doing.. in doing that **so** I think it is really helpful implement in format..*"

R5: P1: "*I would like to add a comment here. In your statement you have said that in urban area 24 hours electricity is available. The govt. is not providing in the rural area. **This** is not happening today. Today aaa 24 hours electricity is available in the rural areas too. **So** actually from these rural areas, like country sides we get the electricity **rather than** from urban areas. **So** we can divert the electricity from rural to urban areas because in urban areas there are enough substitutions, to give the electricity. **So** now govt. is trying to give more electricity to rural areas than urban areas...*"

Above three are the speech samples produced by one of the participants in the study in one turn across three rounds of discussion. We can see the difference in all three (R1, R2 &R3) samples in terms of the length of turn. The use of connecting words (so, so that, as, rather than) has also increased using which the learners are able construct more complex sentences. The short pauses are indicated by 'aaa' in the transcription, which we can see decreasing towards the last round. Decrease in the pauses and increase in speech complexity suggest that there is a positive effect on learners' language fluency as well. This can be substantiated by figure no. 2& 3 as they show us the increase in learners' language production and talk time.

These results can be attributed to learners' level of comfort with the tasks that they developed due to their constant engagement in online discussion. In the interview some of the participants mentioned that there was a positive effect of online synchronous discussion on their F2F discussion as they were already prepared for it.

Another reason for learners' language to be more precise and structured was the time they got to think and process their ideas during online synchronous discussion. A student mentioned..

"*I think online discussion helps us in F2F discussion because we have already discussed similar things earlier. It helps me speaking better because the topic does not appear strange to me. It also helps understanding the topic better.*"

"*in online discussion we have enough time to think. We could understand the mistakes that were made in online discussion and corrected them in F2F. Also I understood how to use connecting phrases while talking*"
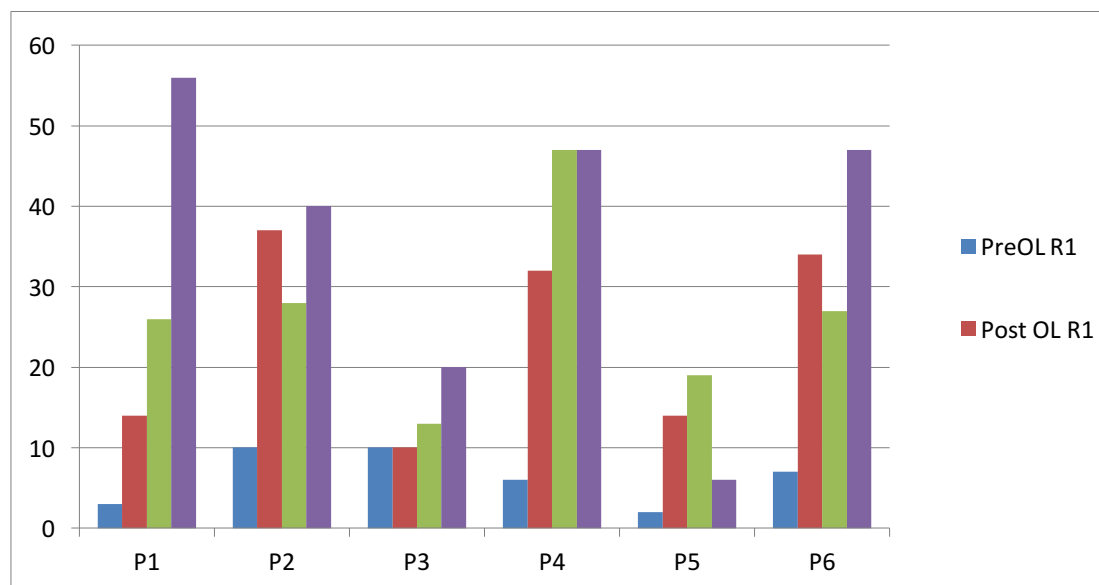
Figure 2. **Number of meaningful chunks produced by the learners across the rounds**

Therefore the qualitative data analysis also suggests that there was a positive effect of online synchronous discussion on learners' language as it increased the level of speech complexity in their speech.

Figure no. 3 shows that there is a constant increase in participants' talk time in all three proficiency levels. One participant in the basic proficiency level showed the reverse effect as there was some issue with the accessibility of internet and she could not participate frequently in online synchronous discussions which resulted negatively. The combination of figure 2&3 shows that there is an improvement in learners' classroom tasks performance as their talk time increased significantly along with the amount of meaningful chunks of language they produced.
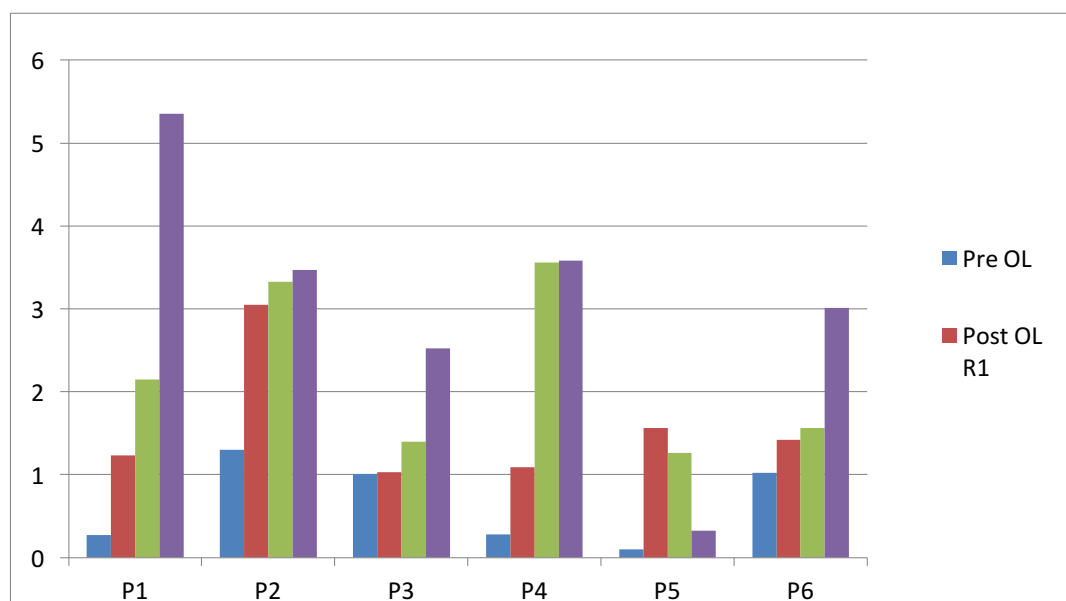

Figure 3. **Time taken by individual students in different rounds of discussion against the time taken by the entire group**

Besides the tasks used in the study, students also witnessed the positive effect of online synchronous tasks on their performance in other solo speaking tasks given by other teachers. They see online synchronous activities as confidence building for F2F tasks.

"*I am able to talk to them (to other participants) freely and able to participate in the class better. As today I gave a presentation, and it was much better than my earlier presentations. This time I was more confident and could elaborate ideas of my ppt well..*"

Discussion

As mentioned in the results section both the research questions are answered positively and there is a strong effect of online synchronous discussion on learners' participation in the classroom face to face discussion. It also helps participants in making their speech more structured without many repetitions. The graphs show that irrespective of learner's proficiency level there is a constant growth in their participation. The study reveals that the use of online synchronous discussion as pre-task before classroom F2F speaking helps learners in multiple ways. Learners get acquainted with the theme that they would be discussing on in classroom and different thought exchange with the peers of their level. This helped them in thinking about their language more as the pressure of content unfamiliarity has been taken off by online discussion. From learners' reflections in the interviews it can be said that visiting and revisiting their own online discussion helps them to modify their language production as they themselves realize their mistakes. As online synchronous discussion demands maximum responsibility from the learners than teachers comparing to the regular classroom practices, it promotes learners autonomy.

Besides all the positive effects of online synchronous discussion on learners' performances, there are certain limitations too. Firstly, learners have to be familiar with the use of technology such as computer, smartphones etc. If the learners are not familiar with using such technical devices then it might create hurdles for them as they have to keep pace with everyone. Secondly, the idea of using online synchronous discussion cannot be generalized for all the age group learners. It would be difficult to implement this on young second language learners as they might not be individual learners at home. Learners' ability to do the tasks on their own is a necessary component in this design. If they are proficient in use of tools like social media, they might suffer in order to maintain their pace with others. Accessibility of internet (though it is not a big issue these days) is also a crucial thing to remain connected with others. Despite the limitations, the idea of using online synchronous discussion has practical implications considering the current problems in ELS classrooms.

Conclusion

The study investigated the effect of online synchronous discussion on learners' speech performance in the group tasks. The results of the study strongly suggested the use of online synchronous discussion as pre-speaking activity. It was found that if online synchronous discussion is used as a pre-task, there is a remarkable growth in their classroom F2F discussion. Towards the end round learners' language also underwent some positive changes such as increase in talk-time, speech complexity and decrease in sentence repetition, long pauses etc. Most of the changes attributed to the online discussion preceded F2F as it increased the task familiarity and gave them a prior practice. Therefore several implications can be drawn for this study. This benefits the teachers as well as learners in a variety of ways. As the learners themselves are the in-charge of the online discussion, it automatically increases their self-learning responsibility and autonomy in the

process of learning. A similar study can be conducted for a longer duration (in terms of rounds) to see the maximum effect on learners' language from different perspective.

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