Research Paper

Using Physical Environment of the Classroom Representing Visual Cues to Boost Iranian EFL Learners' Speaking Skill

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Abstract

This study aims at examining the use of physical environment of the classroom in providing the EFL learners with visual cues as a social interactive strategy in learning speaking skill**.** The role of interactive physical environment in learning language skills cannot be overlooked since the learners spend a lot of their educational life in the classrooms. The current quasi-experimental research examined the role of classroom pictorial cues which are related to the themes of the weekly speaking activities and discuss themes in the classroom as a social interaction. The theoretical assumption of this study is rooted in Vygotsky's (1978) theory of social aspects of language learning. An experimental group (EG) and a control group (CG) participated in this study. Both groups took a speaking pre-test before the intervention. Then the EG worked on the speaking activities focusing on the physical exposure while the CG dealt with the speaking activities in their textbook. After 12 intervention sessions, they took the speaking post-test and the statistical analysis of independent and paired samples *t*-test indicated the EG outperformed the CG in the speaking post-test. Implications suggest physical environment exposure can enhance EFL learners' speaking skill as a social interaction

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Introduction

In English language teaching, pictorial cues could be effective to aid students learn a second/foreign language (Dabiri & Pourhosein Gilakjani, 2019). Physical environment of the

classroom and its social effect on the learners' performances are rooted in Vygotsky's (1978) theory of learning as a social interaction. Pictorial cues or any extra materials used in the classroom may be used as a medium for language practice, especially speaking skill. Social interaction is widely used in English learning od speaking skill (Abdul Rahman & Maarof, 2018; Al Hosni, 2014; Rahimy & Asaei, 2012; Rahimy & Safarpour, 2012; Sheikhipour, Hashemian & Roohani**,** 2021; Ramírez Ortiz & Artunduaga Cuéllar, 20180. Physical environment information can also encourage the students to be more experimental, and look to sources other than the teacher for language input (Krashen, 1989). For instance, the students can absorb some information by looking at the posters or visual aids on the classroom wall and talk about them in the break time or during the class discussion (Bocanegra Bonilla & Ramirez Valencia, 2018; Larsen-Freeman, 2000).

Some empirical researches (e.g., Mulcin & Yildirim, 2019; Rajaei Najafabadi, Bakhshizadeh & Mirzaei, 2019) support the assumption of the importance of physical environment and animation cues in enhancing students' English language. Class discussion on pictorial cues includes the ability to communicate verbally in a functional and accurate way in the target language. A high degree of oral proficiency implies having the ability to apply the linguistic knowledge to the classroom context and situations (Ellis, N., 2008). The main goal of the most English learners is being able to communicate with others to meet their needs.

The problem that is felt among the EFL learners in Iranian context is that traditional methods continue to be used in Iran regardless of the more recent ones. These outdated methods which present the lessons and materials intentionally are no longer useful and efficient regarding improving EFL learners' speaking proficiency. The current speaking activities focus on the printed materials and textbook exercises. This mainly makes EFL learners bored and frustrated in speaking skill sessions (Lightbown, & Spada, 2003).

Pictorial cues could be used as authentic materials and prepared by the students or teachers and brought into the classroom regarding the theme of the related units and lessons. The main pictorial cues may be posters, photos and pictures. The related pictures may be discussed and each student may elaborate on the related pictures and other learners can participate in the communication guided or unguided by the teachers. This may be beneficial for both the teachers and learners. Teachers may save the time to deal with class management and facilitate class activities and learners may arrive at self-confidence in providing the materials and communicate with one another in the classroom without the help of the teacher.

Since Iranian learners should notice the authentic material in a pictorial mode which may affect their knowledge of speaking, they can be provided with enough exposure to argue about various topics in daily interactions.

Two objectives are followed in the current study. First, examining extra materials to boost EFL learners' speaking skill since the current speaking skills are mainly textbook-based and cannot develop the learners' ability to speak the target language fluently. Thus, pictorial cues

may stimulate language learners to have some topics for developing their speaking skill through the exposure available in the physical environment of the classroom. Secondly, this study planned to find out if physical environment interactive learning as a social interaction and collaborative activity has any impact on the enhancement of Iranian EFL learners' speaking performance. Moreover, it attempted to check if there is any significant difference between Iranian EFL learners' speaking skill under interactive physical environment of pictorial cues and non-physical environment conditions. The latter environment may be called plain classroom while the former could be named as pictorial-exposure classroom.

Literature Review

The theoretical assumption of this study goes back to Social Constructivism addressing Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory that refers to humanistic learning that is leading the learners to learn new concepts in a social and self-constructed manner. Vygotsky (1978) believed that ample knowledge of the world can be gained in social interaction and it is socially constructed. Thus, children learn better if they are exposed to social interaction and let them construct their own knowledge. Teachers are just helpers and exposure providers. Language is learned by communicating with others that help the learners develop their cognitive abilities (Mutlu & Yildirim, 2019; Yousefi Far & Soltani, 2013).

Constructivism is rooted in cognitive development that is boosted by social interaction among the learners. Learning is a problem-solving task and language learners are responsible to develop their own cognitive abilities not only solve their linguistic problems but they also boost their consciousness in social interactions with others.

Teachers play the role of helpers (i.e., scaffolding providers) who guide the language learners to arrive at the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Therefore, the main issue in using pictorial cues in the classrooms is to help the learners to figure out the objectives of the pictures and their relationships with the themes of the weekly lessons and units (i.e., problem-solving) on the one hand, and discuss their ideas and concepts in an oral interaction to arrive at ZPD and cognitive development. ZPD in Vygotsky' notion is the distance between the actual learners' cognitive development and the potential one. Social collaboration may close this gap if the teachers can follow scaffolding steps and facilitate learning processes to help the learners solve their own problems and arrive at self-construction through peer interactions (Herlina, 2012).

To arrive at appropriate social interaction among the learners in a class as a physical environment, teachers need required input, i.e., the exposure of authentic materials, pictorial cues, audio/visual sources, etc. (Anglin, Vaez & Cunningham, 2004). For instance, the students can make some sentences using the thematic visual cues placed on the classroom wall. When the students are successful in doing such self-activities, they will be more confident in performing speaking skill (Mannan, 2005; Miller, 2006; Mohamadpur, 2013). Mumford, 2008; Rich, 2009; Richards & Rodgers, 2006).

It provides students a cheerful situation to help them learn from the environment indirectly, even if they do not attention purposefully. Therefore, physical environment learning is a good compensation for the lack of information that is caused by the lake of attention during central teaching. Rich (2009) also added that since young children's central vision is not yet damaged, they are able to see visuals, pictures, posters and realia much easier. For the individuals who are attempting and having a trouble, or even the individuals who have terrible vision, this is a good way to highly enhance their physical environment vision (looking out the corner of your eye) that will cost you nothing but a few minutes every day.

In physical environment learning, realia are used to decorate the classes and to make them more attractive. When students walk into an attractive situation at the beginning of a course, it may help to raise their motivation (Harmer, 2001; Lightbown, & Spada, 2003). In this way, the structures gain experiences environmental and subconsciously. Physical environment information can provoke students to be more experimental, and use more sources to gain more language input to learn language better. For example, through looking at the posters on the classroom wall, students can make some sentences using the grammatical structure and describe a particular place in an English-speaking country. Anglin, Vaez and Cunningham, (2004) state that learners' interpretation of pictures depends on their cognition since they actively construct the meaning of the picture in their mind.

In the current study the term ‘physical environment’ means posters and pictures which are pasted on the wall of the classroom and students can learn more by exposing to them (Bahmani, Pazhakh & Raeesharif, 2012). Visual materials like pictures have a crucial effect on improving knowledge and leaning process. Visual materials are very effective for memory as they are various. Visual materials can help learners to improve their English knowledge- grammar, vocabulary and so on. They stimulate presentation, accelerate learning and group activities. Consequently, events, concepts, and processes become more meaningful to the students and they better conceptualize the printed or spoken words. Children have a marvelous ability for learning languages and an instinctive avenue to success. Visual materials actually economize time; insure more effective learning of vocabulary and grammar and permanent retention than do verbal instruction (Mumford, 2008).

Moreover, visual aids can be displayed in many ways that are helpful for EFL learners. For example, creating and using interesting pictures may be a good way used in the classroom to create a teaching aid that can be used with several groups of students. As proposed in this research, using visual aids to teach EFL grammar under the communicative approach can be favorable for students since it is believed that these ones make the learning experience more interesting (Mannan, 2005).

Learners can absorb much information by using visual tools that words alone cannot give them. Moreover, visual aids can strengthen the comprehension and usage of new items. Visual aids are beneficial and useful to a wide variety of learners; this feature provides an effective way for teachers to utilize various visuals with any subject matter at any level. Pictures are the

most valuable source for teaching items to all types of learners at all levels. Words are learned better via visual tools such as pictures or real objects since the use of images is easier and more effective (Miller, 2006). If learners learn and memorize vocabulary items through visual materials, this way is more helpful than the time when they learn vocabulary items without perception of visual materials and through just text. It is worth noting that using inappropriate teaching materials makes learners encounter difficulties in learning a foreign language.

Concerning physical environment learning and its impacts on language learning, some empirical studies were conducted; most of them reported that physical environment learning or incidental learning is more helpful than non-physical environment learning. Some of them are mentioned in this section. Bahmani, Pazhakh and Raeesharif (2012) investigated the effects of physical environment learning on vocabulary acquisition, retention and recall. They worked on 80 female participants whom they were randomly divided into two groups- the experimental and control groups. The findings showed a significant difference between the two groups for each posttest. The results also showed that the physical environment exposure of vocabulary to the participants highly affected their vocabulary acquisition, retention, and recall.

Mohamadpur (2013) demonstrated the effects of physical environment English learning and creating motivation on Iranian secondary school EFL learners of elementary Level. This paper elaborated this concept by considering additional aspects of physical environment learning (learning by elements other than the text itself. Elements like pictures, physical actions and gestures) and how it motivates students to learn English. The research was performed on a group of learners of elementary EFL in Razi English Language Institute at Gonbad-e-kavus, Golestan province, Iran. The results showed that physical environment learning has significant effects on English Learning and creating motivation on these learners.

Yousefi Far and Soltani (2013) inspected the effects of physical environment teaching on Iranian EFL learners' writing skills in cyber environments. A group of 80 homogeneous students at language institute were selected from a total population of 120 at the intermediate level in Dehdasht, Kohgiloyeh and Boyer Ahmad province, Iran. While experimental A was assigned to cyber environment and received instructions regarding physical environment teaching, B was selected as the control group. The results depicted that physical environment teaching in cyber environments had a significant effect on improving Iranian EFL learners' writing skills. Badri, Badri and Badri (2015) examined the effects of physical environment teaching on Iranian EFL vocabulary improvement. In the study two intact classes of 30 elementary learners were chosen for teaching the targeted words through posters that are placed on the wall of the classroom. The results indicated that the experimental group outperformed over the control group.

Literature of the study has showed that when students are exposed to more authentic input, especially visual cues, they are effectively involved in language learning. However, the use of physical environment as class exposure in learning speaking skill has been rarely investigated at least based on the articles reviewed by the researchers. Exposing to visual cues in class

physical environment is not confined to pictures. Any extra authentic material that can be used to develop learners' cognitive development other than their textbook could be used as exposure in that context. Learning speaking skill through using these additional materials in such an environment could be conscious and unconscious. In sum, most of the mentioned empirical studies proved that physical environment leaning influences language learning positively. The present study was designed to find answers to the following questions:

RQ 1. To what extent does physical environment visual exposure as a social interactive strategy affect EFL learners speaking skill?

RQ 2. Is there any significant difference between the experimental and control groups' use of interactive physical environment exposure of visual cues to develop EFL learners' speaking skill in the pre and post-tests?

Methodology

Design

The research design is a quasi-experimental study with a pre-test, intervention and a post-test. Two groups of EG and CG were exposed to two methods of learning speaking skill in two contexts of physical exposure in class environment and regular (i.e., conventional) class. Quantitative data were gathered through administering speaking skill pre- and post-tests and the results of the groups' means were compared through descriptive and inferential statistics.

Participants and Setting

Participants of the study comprised of 50 students who were chosen from among 91 EFL learners majoring in Translation in Payam Noor University, Iran. They took Oxford Placement Test (OPT) and their English language proficiency was determined as intermediate level with the band score of 37-47. Their age was ranging from 21 to 45(Mean, 25.4) and they are Persian speakers of both male and female learners. They were voluntarily participated in the research and confirmed their willingness via filling in consent letters. Then they were randomly assigned into two groups of EG and CG.

Materials and Instruments

The textbook for teaching speaking was Top-Notch B2 (Soslo & Ascher, 2017). 8 units were covered in 12 sessions. The speaking activities of this book were come into focus. They were picture description, class discussion, and peer interaction. The instruments included OPT, a pretest, a posttest, and a scoring checklist developed by Hughes (2003) for scoring the speaking tests.

OPT was used before administering the pre-test to homogenize the participants' level of proficiency. It included 60 items and the leaners who achieved from 37 to 47 were determined as the intermediate level. The time allocation of the exam was 60 minutes. Its reliability was met in a pilot study through KR-21 formula as (r=.91).

The second instrument was a researcher-made speaking test. It was a pre-test based on the topics collected from the learners' textbook. The learners had to talk about the three topics of

the units (e.g., family, address, directions, traveling, weather, etc.) about 4 to 5 minutes and their speech was recorded for the second rater. The reliability of the pre-test was calculated through inter-rater reliability by means of Pearson correlation analysis as (r= .89).

The third instrument was a post-test of oral performance. It was similar to the pre-test in form but with different topics. The reliability of the post-test was calculated through inter-rater reliability by means of Pearson Correlation Analysis as (r= .93). It is worth noting that two experienced teachers confirmed the validity of the OPT, pre and post-tests.

The fourth instrument was the speaking checklist (Hughes, 2003). It includes five categories (i.e., accent, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension) and each category ranged from 1 to 6 points. Total score of the rubric is 30.

Procedure

In the first step, 50 homogeneous intermediate students participated voluntarily in the study. Then they were randomly assigned to two equal groups based on OPT, namely an EG and CG. Then they took a pre-test of speaking. Oral performance of the learners was recorded and scored by two raters based on a speaking rubric estimating the interrater reliability of scoring. The average scores of the two raters were used as the scores of each individual's speaking score of the pre-test.

Treatment sessions started after the pre-test and students participated in classes. The activities in the EG included discussion and communication on the visual cues (i.e., pictures, photos, posters, maps, etc.) prepared by the students. These visual cues were authentic and gathered from various sources like the Internet, family photos, book pictures, newspaper and magazine pictures, etc. According to the theme of each unit, the learners were responsible to bring at least one visual cue and placed it on the Table in the classroom. Then they talked about each picture while the teacher was going to direct students to follow discussion and remain active during class time. The students worked in peer group collaboratively and the teacher monitored them for correct pronunciation, word order, fluency and accuracy in an implicit manner.

The CG read the unit and did the speaking activities of the textbook. The units included comprehension questions, guessing, completion, and true/false exercises. They listened or read the unit sections, and then answer the questions orally. The control group, on the other hand, was engaged in the ordinary program of the classroom; they did not receive the physical environment treatment. No pictures and posters were used in the control groups' class. The class table was bare of pictures. At the beginning of each session the researcher asked the participants of both groups some questions related to the previous lesson. The teacher monitored them to give correct responses and correct their pronunciation, word order, fluency and accuracy in an implicit manner. The teaching processes, materials, and time allocation were the same in two groups except the extra visual cues that were used as outside the textbook activities.

After 12 intervention sessions, both groups took the speaking post-test. In sum, there were 14 sessions including two sessions for administering the pre-and post-tests and 12 sessions of intervention, each 90 minutes. The learners' test included an explanation of the given topics selected from the textbook in 3 to 5 minutes. Their voice was recorded for exact scoring procedure by the two raters based on the Hughes' (2003) speaking exam rubric.

Data were collected and scored from 1 to 30 in both groups and then descriptive and inferential statistics were conducted to find any significant difference between and within groups' means of the pre-and post-tests.

For answering the research questions, after gathering the needed data the researcher analyzed the data with the help of SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Science) software version 17. Finally, independent and paired samples t-tests were run to find out the effectiveness of physical environment learning on EFL learners' oral performance and also to compare the performance of control group with experimental group.

Results

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances (see Table 2) shows the variance of the two groups' scores in the pre- and pos-tests are not significantly different at (0.05); therefore, parametric statistics like t-test can be used to answer the RQs. Descriptive statistics of both groups' means in the pre and pos-tests concerned with the EG and CG are presented in Table 1.

Table 1.
Descriptive Statistics (Control and Experimental Groups)

	Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
EG	Pre-test	25	12.72	6.79	1.35
	Post-test	25	22.08	6.93	1.38
CG	Pre-test	25	15.60	7.55	1.51
	Post-test	25	15.92	6.97	1.39

Table 1 indicates the difference between the mean scores of the EG and CG in the pre- and post-test. While there is a small difference between the mean scores of the EG and CG, the post-tests show there is a big between the groups' mean scores. The statistical analysis of independent samples t-test may clarify the significant level of the difference between the mean scores. Results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2.
Comparisons of Pre-test and Post-tests of both Groups (Independent Samples t-test)

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference Lo.	Up.
EG & CG pre	Equal variances assumed	.641	.427	-1.417	48	.163	-2.88	2.03	-6.96	1.20
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.417	47.4	.163	-2.88	2.03	-6.96	1.20
EG & CG post	Equal variances assumed	.706	.405	3.132	48	.003	6.16	1.96	2.20	10.11
	Equal variances not assumed			3.132	47.9	.003	6.16	1.96	2.20	10.11

Table 2 shows the EG and CG means in the pre-test is ($t=1.417$, $p>0.05$). The difference between the two tests is not significant. EG and CG means in the pre- and post-test indicate the difference is significant ($t=3.132$, $p<0.05$). It can be concluded that the physical environment learning had positive effects on the participants' speaking skill of EG.

Table 3.
Pre-test and Post-tests of Each Group's Means (Paired Samples t-test)

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	EG pre EG post	-9.36	9.88	1.97	-13.43	-5.28	-4.736	24	.000
Pair 2	CG pre CG post	-.32	7.05	1.41	-3.23	2.59	-.227	24	.823

Table 3 indicates (t=4.736, p<0.05) with df=24 addressing the significant difference between the EG's pre- and post-test mean scores of the speaking tests. In opposite, the difference between the pre-test and the post-test in the CG is not significant (t=0.227, p>0.05). In other words, the CG who did not received physical environment exposure of visual cues could not gain a significant difference comparing to the EG' mean score in the post-test.

Discussion

Results of the study is going to answer two research questions. The first research questions address the use of physical environment as a social interactive strategy in learning speaking skill. Findings indicate that using interactive physical environment improved Iranian EFL learners' speaking skill. After analyzing the data, the results showed that there was not a significant difference between the performance of both experimental and control groups in the pre-test of both groups. But in contrast, there was a significant difference between the performance of the two groups in the post-test. It can be concluded that EG who received physical environment instruction got significant scores and outperformed than the CG. In fact, physical environment of visual cues affected the language learning positively. Therefore, printed materials can be used aligned with related visual cues affecting the learners' speaking skill. This is in line with Anglin et al, (2004) and Miller (2006) who emphasized the role of visual cues in learning speaking accuracy and fluency. Mannan (2005) supports the findings of the current research and suggests the use of auditory visual cues.

The reason that the students of EG outperformed than the CG is that the EG were exposed to the visual cues. At each session they incidentally received input through the environment which they were in Krashen (1989). In the current research, cheerful and colorful visual cues in classes could attract the attention of the students more and more. In addition, this made the participants learn speaking skill better than the CG who used the printed materials. Results revealed that teachers may gain insights into the role of visual cues and use then as supplementary materials to encourage learners participating in communicative activities.

The results of this study are in line with Bahmani, Pazhakh, and Raeesharif (2012) who investigated the effects of physical environment learning. Moreover, the present study also supports the findings of Mohamadpur (2013) who demonstrated the effects of physical environment in creating learners' motivation in Iranian EFL context.

The second research question addressed a significant difference between the groups' post-tests of speaking skill and estimated the effectiveness of interactive physical exposure in classroom visual cues to develop EFL learners' speaking skill**.** Participants in EG were more successful than the CG in the post-since the Physical environment strategy helped them enhance their social interaction via oral performance. It was proved that the integration of visual cues into printed materials helped learners to perform better in speaking skill.

Findings of the study concerned with the second research question agree with Yousefi Far and Soltani (2013) who inspected the effects of physical environment teaching on Iranian EFL

learners' language skills other than speaking one. They worked on writing skills in cyber environments and found the efficacy of using visual cues to boost learners' writing skill. Receiving visual cues in the class environment could consciously or subconsciously affect speaking development in the learners. The teachers can follow scaffolding approach to help the learners arrive at ZPD regarding socio-cultural activities in classroom discussion. Physical environment technique helped the learners absorb the materials effortlessly and enjoy positive effects on English learning. The findings of this study also are compatible with Abdolmanafi Rokni and Karimi's (2013) findings. They investigated the effects of visual materials such as pictures, real objects, and flash cards on EFL learners' vocabulary learning.

Conclusion

The present study examined the effectiveness of physical environment learning regarding the use of visual cues in learning speaking skill among the intermediate language learners. Findings showed that the use of visual cues in the physical class boosts learners' speaking skill. Socio collaborative instructions play an important role in learners' oral performance. As students cannot do well in English and have difficulty in speaking, teachers can take advantage of the study to provide their students with a more interesting and effective interactive strategy in using authentic visual cues accompanying the printed texts.

Pedagogical implications of the current study can be twofold. Theoretically, the use of visual cues may be used to develop learners' perceptions of collaborative interactions and help them arrive at ZPD. Practically, EFL teachers may use visual cues for teaching other language skills and subskills other than speaking skill. Moreover, learners' engagement could be developed since they may provide the class with related visual cues that involve them in class discussion.

Limitations of this study could be the small size of the participant. The other limitation goes with the quantitative aspect of the study. Further research could be conducted with a large group and in a mixed-methods study. An interview with the experimental groups can elicit their beliefs of using visual cues in the class environment and provide the researchers with qualitative data. This study focused on the learning of speaking skill but future studies may use the physical environment of the classroom and visual cues to teach other language skills and subskills. Moreover, learners' motivation, anxiety, and attitude as learners' affective variables that are not investigated in the present study could be the subjects of future research.

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