Effects of Student Collaboration on ESL Learners' Vocabulary Development

Adlina Ariffin

Department of English Language & Literature, Kulliyyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge & Human Sciences
International Islamic University Malaysia, 53100 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
adlina@iium.edu.my

Abstract: This paper describes the effectiveness of student collaboration as a technique in improving vocabulary development among a group of ESL learners. The main motivation behind this study was the concern that vocabulary has become a neglected area in the teaching of English language. The main aims of the study were to evaluate whether student collaboration helped to improve students' vocabulary and the extent of the improvement. Two types of data were collected during the research – qualitative and quantitative. The qualitative data were collected from the teacher's observation, students' journals and interview; while, the quantitative data were collected from the pre-test and post-test. The results from the t-test indicated that students did make an improvement in their vocabulary knowledge after they had studied together collaboratively. Besides that, student collaboration was found to be an effective technique in teaching vocabulary because the interaction that students made during their discussion helped them to improve other language skills such as reading, listening and speaking, gave them opportunities to participate in their own learning, built their self-confidence in interacting with the group members and cultivated a sharing attitude among them.

Keywords: Collaborative learning, ESL learners, Student collaboration, Vocabulary development

1.0   Introduction

The most fundamental element of a language is the words or lexis. When one reads a sentence, one will notice that the sentence is actually a string of words. People are exposed to words since they were very young. Beginning with one-syllable words, they progress gradually to acquire more complicated lexical items, and subsequently, short, simple sentences. This process does not stop here. Throughout their lives their acquisition of vocabulary knowledge will keep on expanding in quantity and complexity. Thus, it could be said that vocabulary learning is a continuous process, but it all begins with words or lexis.

Parallel to L1 acquisition that begins with vocabulary acquisition, learning a foreign language too begins with the learning of vocabulary (Decarrico, 2001; Susanto, 2017). Beck and McKeown (1985) in Huckin, Haynes and Coady (1993) stated, "…vocabulary knowledge is the 'cornerstone of literacy'" (p.30). This simply means that a student needs to possess sufficient vocabulary knowledge in order to successfully perform the four literacy skills – reading, writing, listening and speaking (Nation, 2013). The ability to grasp the semantic, syntactic and morphological systems of the lexis will empower learners to trudge on to master other components of the language. For example, knowing and practicing the correct syllable stress in the pronunciation of a lexical item will improve learners' oral skills, whereas knowledge on the

differences in spelling and meanings of lexical items will be of great significance for both aural and oral skills.

Many studies have shown that vocabulary knowledge is also a critical feature to gauge reading ability among learners (Koda, 1989; McKeown & Curtis, 1987; Nagy, 1988; Nation & Coady, 1988). Grabe (1991) stressed that vocabulary knowledge is a fundamental aspect in reading comprehension where "background knowledge and predicting are severely constrained by the need to know vocabulary and structure" (p.380). The same notion was echoed in a few other studies (Carrell, 1989a; Eskey, 1986; Koda,1989; Swaffar, 1988). Moreover, Dycus (1997) stated, "More and more studies show that a key factor affecting L2 readers' ability to make use of context is vocabulary knowledge" (p. 72).

Vocabulary knowledge is also very pertinent to ensure academic excellence for both L1 and L2 learners. A lot of studies have successfully shown the unequivocal relationship between vocabulary size and academic achievement (Baumann & Kameenui, 1991; Beck & McKeown, 1991; Graves, 1986; Liu, 2016; Rinaldi et al., 2013; White, Graves & Slater, 1990). Learners must possess a certain number of vocabularies at a particular age in order to be able to meet the academic requirements of a specific academic level such as the elementary, primary, secondary and tertiary. For instance, the range of vocabulary size for 5-to-6-year old should be about 2,500-26,000 words (Beck & McKeown, 1991), while students between the ages of 9 to 15 are expected to know about 88,500-word families in order to be able to cope with their learning needs (Nagy & Anderson, 1984). As for second language learners who want to read advanced academic sources with full competence and understanding, they will need to form a vocabulary size of 40,000 words with an increase of 3,000 words a year (Nagy & Herman, 1987). This statistical evidence shows that vocabulary learning is indeed a major task to L1 learners and a tougher hurdle to L2 learners.

2.0   Literature Review

2.1   Vocabulary Development

Vocabulary is indeed one of the crucial elements in learning a language as aptly put by Wilkins (1972), ''While without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed'' (pp.111-112). His statement clearly indicates that lexical richness is undoubtedly an important substance in language learning, more important than the knowledge of grammar. Numerous studies have also proven the significant roles of vocabulary in learning a foreign language (Decarrico, 2001; Susanto, 2017); in enhancing reading ability (Koda, 1989; McKeown & Curtis, 1987; Nagy, 1988; Nation & Coady, 1988, Grabe, 1991 Carrell, 1989a; Eskey, 1986; Koda,1989; Swaffar, 1988, Dycus 1997); and in ascertaining academic excellence for both L1 and L2 learners (Baumann & Kameenui, 1991; Beck & McKeown, 1991; Graves, 1986; Liu, 2016; Rinaldi et al., 2013; White, Graves & Slater, 1990). Despite this significant fact, vocabulary has occupied a backseat position compared to grammar. Its importance has been very much downplayed.

Baker, Simmons and Kameenui (n.d.) highlighted that, "The enduring effect of the vocabulary limitation of students with diverse learning needs is becoming increasingly apparent" (p.1). Many researchers have also lamented the neglect of direct vocabulary teaching for L2 learners (Berne & Blachowics, 2008; Nation, 2005; Oxford, 2003; Schmitt, 2000; Walters, 2004). Moreover, according to Meara (1982), "most learners identify the acquisition of vocabulary as their greatest source of problems" (p.100). Hence, Krashen (1988) had suggested that more emphasis should be placed in the teaching of vocabulary as compared to grammar in the language classes.

In Malaysia, teaching of vocabulary has received a backseat position in its education system. Although vocabulary is listed as one of the language contents in the English language syllabi for the primary and secondary schools and the syllabus for the higher learning institutions, it is not given the same importance as the four language skills i.e. listening, speaking, reading and writing. Normal English proficiency classes are more focused on building students' reading comprehension, enhancing students' writing skill and creating activities for students' class participation. More often than not vocabulary is

taught in a 'touch and go' manner rather than having dedicated and structured lessons on developing learners' skills to decipher meanings of words via various techniques and approaches. This situation is further aggravated by the fact that the education system focuses mainly on exams where "Grading conventions…emphasise correctness and seldom reward lexical richness" (Laufer, 1998).

Hence, upon realizing the need to rightfully place vocabulary knowledge in language teaching and learning by giving it adequate emphasis, this study employed a direct approach in teaching vocabulary, which was guessing meaning in context, to enhance language learners' vocabulary development. This study was developed on the basis of a student-centred approach where learners were asked to work collaboratively in their groups in order to train them to be independent learners.

2.2   **Student Collaboration in Vocabulary Acquisition**

Working collaboratively in a group is an effective way to practice and acquire discourse competence. When learners learn in groups, they are not only engaged in the sole purpose of completing the task at hand, which can also be done individually, but they are also given the opportunity to be involved in a face-to-face interaction. This process is vital for their development as social beings because it allows them to acquire important communication skills such as negotiating, clarifying, inferring, hypothesizing, suggesting, qualifying, generalizing and disagreeing (Long & Porter, 1985). Undoubtedly, these skills are a necessity for learners to apply in real-life situations. On this note, Allwright (1983) highlighted that "communication practice in the classroom is pedagogically useful because it represents a necessary and productive stage in the transfer of classroom learning to the outside world" (p.157). In short, collaborative work among students provides them a chance to develop those fundamental skills which are entities of communicative competence in second language as well as in real-life.

Besides that, studies have shown that when students work together to decipher meanings of words, "a high proportion of the words in the passage can be guessed successfully" (Liu Na & Nation, 1985, p.39). On the same note, a study by Leung (2008) indicated that the interactivity of collaborative learning resulted in the greatest gains in word knowledge. There is a potential for learners to help other students to identify and use the clues in order to make correct guesses. Also, they are given the opportunity to ask other students rather than having to consult the teachers all the time. This is indeed an important step towards a more student-centred approach where learners take responsibility for their own learning

Various studies have brought to light the importance of contextual guessing as one of the most effective strategies of vocabulary skills (Alqahtani, 2015; Alsaawi, 2013; Nash & Snowling, 2006) and its importance is given much emphasis in ESL pedagogies (Dubin, Eskay & Grabe, 1986; Dubin, 1993) The role of context is undeniably crucial because "meanings of words are more easily semanticised if they are embedded in a meaningful context" (Beheydt, 1987, p.63). Other research have also shown that explicit teaching of this technique has brought about an improvement in reading comprehension and vocabulary learning (Oxford & Scarcella, 1994; Yu, 2001; Voviana, 2007). On top of that, Huckin and Bloch (1993) found that learning words through context led to some positive results either in longitudinal or single-session studies. Moreover, Yu (2001) highly recommended this approach due to its unique problem-solving quality that would generate learners' cognitive processes and thus, make them more enjoyable and active in developing their interest for reading.

There are two main approaches in teaching vocabulary – direct and indirect. Direct vocabulary teaching involves "conscious effort to learn vocabulary either in context or in isolation", whereas indirect vocabulary teaching involves an incidental acquisition of new words through reading and listening. Direct vocabulary teaching acts as a scaffold to indirect vocabulary learning. In their study on explicit vocabulary instruction, Nash and Snowling (2006) revealed that learners' vocabulary knowledge is greatly enhanced by using a contextual approach to the instruction as compared to merely emphasizing word definitions. Many research have shown the importance of providing direct guidance in teaching vocabulary via different techniques and strategies (Alamri & Rogers, 2018; Hennerbry et al., 2017; Huffman, 2010; Norris & Ortega, 2000; Oxford, 2003; Read, 2004). However, to the researcher's knowledge, most of these research

mainly employed quantitative means in measuring the development of vocabulary knowledge achieved by learners. The present study aimed to uncover the richness of this endeavour by adding the qualitative paradigm in the analysis of the data.

Due to the obvious neglect in the teaching of vocabulary skills, this study aspired to investigate the effects of using student collaboration in enhancing vocabulary on a group of ESL learners at a higher learning institution. More specifically, it aimed to investigate whether student collaboration would bring about improvements on the learners' vocabulary knowledge and if so, the extent to which such improvements would be demonstrated. Therefore, the research aimed to find answers to the following questions:

1) Does student collaboration help to increase vocabulary knowledge as indicated from the results of the pre-test and post-test?
2) To what extent does student collaboration technique help L2 learners to improve their vocabulary?

3.0   Research Methodology

3.1   The Students

This study was conducted in a Reading Skill course for intermediate level learners at a higher learning institution. It involved 3 male and 16 female students from Iraq, Thailand, Malaysia, Yemen, Vietnam, Bosnia and Philippines.

3.2 Research Design

This study employed a mixed-method approach where data were collected quantitatively and qualitatively. Quantitative data were collected via the pre-test and post-test, whereas qualitative data were gathered and triangulated via teacher's observation, students' journals and interview. Figure 1.0 illustrates the overall design of the study.
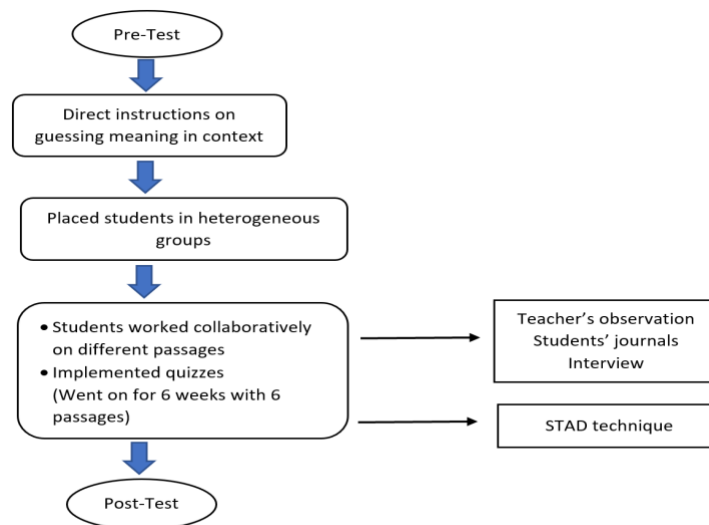

Figure 1.0 Research Design

3.3   The Procedure

As indicated in Figure 1.0, during the first week of the lesson, the teacher implemented the pre-test in the class. The pre-test and post-test were adapted from Nation's (2016) Productive Vocabulary Levels Test. Students were given an hour to complete the questions. The results from this test were taken as an indication of the vocabulary knowledge of the students at the beginning of the course. Also, the scores from the test were used by the teacher to divide the students according to their achievement and to place them into heterogeneous groups. The following stage was when the teacher began giving them direct instructions on the technique of guessing meaning in context. This training took about one week. During this stage, the teacher taught the strategy explicitly using a gradual approach. She first introduced the technique by using short sentences followed by short paragraphs (Refer to Appendix I).

After the students had understood the technique, the teacher proceeded to the next stage of dividing them into heterogeneous groups. Once they were placed in their groups, the teacher then assigned them to work together on passages which were taken from their textbook. This was when their collaboration and cooperation was observed and recorded. The passage contained words which had been indicated by the teacher. These were the words that they needed to find the meanings. During this period, the students were not encouraged to ask the teacher or to use a dictionary. Instead, the teacher emphasized the importance of students helping one another and making sure that all their group members had mastered the technique of guessing meaning in context. As such, they were assigned to keep a record of the words learnt in the form of vocabulary cards. The teacher also explained that it was crucial for each member in the group to master the vocabulary skill so that all of them were able to give significant contribution through their individual scores and attain their eventual aim of being the best team.

To further strengthen their cooperation and enhance their retention of the words learnt, the teacher conducted an individual quiz during the next lesson. The questions for the quizzes were actually a reproduction of the vocabulary items they learnt from the passages taken from the textbook. The individual scores from this quiz were compared against their base scores before the eventual marks for the groups were calculated. Finally, the group with the highest score was awarded. This procedure was repeated for another six lessons using three passages and three sets of quizzes (refer to Appendix II). After seven weeks, the post-test was administered. Lastly, the scores from the pre-test and post-test were analysed to find out whether there had been improvements in the students' vocabulary knowledge.

3.4   The Collaborative Technique

In this research, student collaboration was implemented and inculcated by using an adaptation of the Student Teams – Achievement Divisions (STAD) technique. It is a peer-tutoring method which was developed by Slavin (1986). This technique was deemed suitable for this research mainly because it leads to better achievements, encourages positive attitudes and increases students' motivation (Bejarano, 1987; Van Wyk, 2012). Basically, the general procedure of this technique comprises of five stages: a) presenting the teaching content b) dividing students into heterogeneous groups c) giving worksheets to students for them to work together cooperatively and collaboratively d) assigning individual test or quiz e) calculating individual scores to turn into group scores and rewarding the winning team.

During the first stage, the teacher presented the teaching unit in a suitable way that was comprehensible to the learners. She divided the students into heterogeneous groups based on achievement tests such as their final grades. Having done that, the teacher then assigned worksheets which required the students to work together in a cooperative and collaborative manner. During this stage, the learners had to make sure that all their group members had mastered or understood the teaching unit well so that they would be able to gain high marks in the individual test administered during the next stage. Finally, all their individual scores were computed to represent their group scores. The group with the highest score was considered the winner.

One of the unique qualities of this technique lies in its motivational power. Unlike other small group strategies, STAD provides an opportunity for even the low-achievers to contribute their marks to the

groups. This is because students' contribution is based on their base score, derived from students' average marks on previous quizzes. Students earned points on improvements they made from their base score. This means that even the slightest improvement made by the low-achieving students would be rewarded. The allocation of points is detailed below:

Quiz score	*Improvement Points*
More than 10 points below base score	0
10 points below to 1 point below base score	10
base score to 10 points above base score	20
more than 10 points above base score	30
perfect paper (regardless of base score)	30

Finally, the winning team was decided upon the total of the improvement scores achieved rather than on their raw scores in the quizzes. Thus, this technique encouraged the students to improve their marks for each quiz and to compete with their own base scores rather than their peers. Moreover, marks were not deducted for low achievement. Hence, it provided "equal opportunities for success" to all students regardless of their proficiency levels (Slavin, 1990, p.4).

4.0 Findings and Data Analysis

4.1 RQ1: Increase in vocabulary knowledge as indicated from the pre-test and post-test

At the initial stage of the research, 19 students sat for the pre-test. This was to gauge their level of vocabulary knowledge at the beginning of the semester. After they had completed the whole procedure involved in this research, which entailed the collaborative work and training on guessing meanings in context, they were given a post-test. During the post-test, two students were absent. Thus, all in all, only the results of 17 students were included in the analyses. These results from the pre-test and the post-test were compared to investigate whether there had been improvements on the students' vocabulary knowledge (refer to Table 1.0).

Table 1.0 below shows the results from a t-test that was run on the scores from the pre-test and post-test. As indicated in the table, the mean value between the two tests were significant, t (16) = 0.03, (p<0.05). The mean recorded for the pre-test was 8.82 while the mean for the post-test was 11.53. This proves that there has been a significant increase in the students' vocabulary knowledge after they were trained to work collaboratively during the research period. Thus, this quantitative evidence strongly suggests that student collaboration is a very effective technique in assisting students to acquire vocabulary knowledge.

Table 1. Pre-test versus Post-test

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std.Error Mean
Pair 1	Pretest	8.82	17	6.17	1.50
	Posttest	11.53	17	5.75	1.39

		Paired Differences			t	df	Sig.(2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std.Error Mean			
Pair 1	Pretest - Posttest	-2.71	3.16	.77	-3.533	16	.003

4.2 RQ2: The extent student collaboration technique helps L2 learners to improve their vocabulary

Due to its qualitative nature, the analyses on this research question are divided into two categories: (a) Students' interaction with each other, and (b) students' cooperation in getting the meanings of words.

a.   **Students' interaction with each other**

One important criterion for student collaboration to work is the ability of the learners to interact well among themselves. However, the outcome was contrary to my expectation when I first placed the students in their groups. Initially, they were divided according to gender. This was agreed by all the students in the class. The males were placed in one group, while the females were separated into four groups. During the first task, I noticed that a few of them showed some reluctance to participate. This was very obvious from their facial expressions. When I observed the male group, I found them to be so frustratingly quiet. Out of the four members, one of them, named Hajiri, was trying very hard to get some responses from the others. But after a few futile attempts, Hajiri suddenly blurted out, "I am angry." After the class I asked Hajiri what actually happened, and he said that he was so disappointed with his group mates. He said, "They are very passive. They didn't want to participate in any way…It's not only for reading but also writing…listening…speaking."

Due to this major problem, the participants had to be regrouped irrespective of their gender. The students gave their consensus. Then I kept a close look at one of the male students who was most quiet in the previous group. His name was Auday. To my astonishment, Auday showed a drastic change in his attitude and behavior. He was very jovial, active and ever-willing to share with his group mates who happened to be females. This change prompted me to get some clarification from him. Below is an excerpt of my first interview with him.

Teacher : Normally when I am in the class I see that you are very quiet.
Auday   : That's because I am shy.
Teacher : But why is it in the group, you are very vocal?
Auday   : In group I only talk to just a few people. I don't like to talk to the whole class because I am shy.
Teacher : Previously when I put you in the groups with the brothers, why didn't you participate?
Auday   : Because boys are rough…sometimes I am shy to do something, guys will say "you have done nothing!!!"
Teacher : So you feel more comfortable if you are working with girls?
Auday   : Yes…girls are very serious…girls can do better than boys. Like just now Manesha, she asked me what's the meaning of this…she is willing to discuss with me.

Upon reflection on this interview, I learned that as a teacher I always thought that what I did in class would always be suitable for the students. It is as if I know what is best for them. But, obviously in this case I was wrong. It enlightened me that Auday's resistance from participating in his group has nothing to do with his lack in proficiency or his inability to communicate. Instead, the resistance stemmed from his preference to work with the opposite gender. After that interview with Auday, I decided to regroup the students. I was overwhelmed to notice that Auday was very much happier in his new group. As a matter of fact, the other male students also showed positive interaction with their new group members. The positive changes in the male students did not only impress me but also other students including Manesha who wrote in her journal, "I observed that some students who were inactive and unable to say their opinions, they became very active and my view changed about them."

Nevertheless, there was one student in the class, Samira, who displayed some reluctance when the males were placed with the females during the initial stage of the regrouping. She was feeling uneasy with the male member in her group. In her journal she mentioned, "Today the discussion was ok. I had no problem with the girls, except him." After reading her feedback, I did not take any immediate action. I allowed her to familiarize herself with the group for another two weeks. After that, I interviewed her. Below is an excerpt of the interview.

Teacher : Last two weeks, you mentioned in your journal that you had a problem with Hajiri. Why?
Samira : I don't like to talk to him…boys…I don't feel comfortable…I don't like to talk to boys.
Teacher : Do you still feel the same way now?
Samira   : Now, it's ok…because I see him every day and we do talk to each other.

I was very happy to find out that she was finally able to work together in her group. Albeit she might bore certain biasness or dislike towards male students, eventually she was able to resolve and change her perception towards the opposite gender – maybe not in totality but at least in regards to her male group mates.

This whole episode has brought to light a few important lessons for me. Firstly, teachers should always be very alert and sensitive to signals transmitted by students in various ways in the classroom especially through their body language and facial expressions. These signs will inform teachers whether the students are at ease with the learning conditions, the suitability of the tasks that are assigned and the methodology used. If they detect any unusual or peculiar phenomenon, instead of brushing it aside, they should try to investigate and identify the crux of the problem because the outcome may have a very significant value to their teaching experience. In other words, teachers should identify suitable conditions for the students to give their best contribution. For example, in my case, I learned that Auday preferred to work with females rather than males. So, in future class activities I would always make it a point to place him with the females. And in the case of Samira, I knew now that if I were to meet the same problem again, I would have to give some space and time for the students to adjust to their new groups. If all else fails, then only would I change the composition of the group.

Secondly, it is also crucial that teachers do not prejudge students at face value. This is mainly because teachers sometimes tend to label 'active students' as 'good learners' and 'quiet students' as 'weak learners'. I made this mistake with Auday. The first time I met him, he was very reclusive and uncooperative. So, my first impression of him was that he was a potential 'problem' in the class. But after I found out the real cause for his attitude and when I saw the improvement he made, my impression on him has changed as well. I saw a new person in him, someone who is very confident, knowledgeable and supportive.

And finally, I found that group work is a good training ground for learners who are very shy to speak up in front of the whole class. Students are very afraid that if they make mistakes, the entire class will laugh at them. This concern was echoed by Auday during my second interview with him. He said, "I am shy…maybe when I make sentence …get mistakes, someone will laugh at me." A whole-class method too may not ascertain that all students receive equal opportunity to participate in the class activity.

According to one of the students, Lin, she preferred group work because, "There are only a few students in a group, so I can participate. That's why I am active in my group." She also voiced her difficulty regarding the whole-class method, "When teacher asks students for the unknown words…I cannot follow because some of them know about the words…so I just have to shut up even though there are many words I do not know." Another student, Dayang, admitted that the group discussion has made her more confident to speak. She stated in her journal, "I observe that it [group work] makes me more confident to talk something and discuss any topic."

b. **Students' cooperation in getting the meanings of words**

Throughout the entire seven weeks of the research period, students were given three passages to work on. I realized that during the discussion sessions on these passages, the students displayed multifaceted roles in carrying out the tasks.

i. Group members as **'Motivator'**

During their group discussion sessions, I noted that the students were very helpful towards each other. Each group tried to include every member in giving his or her opinions. If they see anyone who seemed to be reclusive, they would probe and motivate the person to get involved in the discussion. For instance, during my observation I noted a student, Fauziah, noticed that one of her group members was rather quiet, so she tried to pull him into their discussion.
(They were trying to get the meaning for the word 'former')
Fauziah : people in the previous society
Fauziah asked Sami : Excuse me, can you tell me about this word?

Another example was when Auday's group was discussing the same word – 'former'.
Manesha : It's [former] an adjective…not noun.
Lin   : former…former…form!!!
Auday asked Amal : What do you think?

In both instances, albeit the quiet students seldom produce any responses, it did not hamper the other group members from trying to motivate them to speak up in the groups.

ii. Group members as **'Problem solver'**

It is interesting to note that the students in this research came from different language backgrounds. To some of them their first exposure to the language took place at the university, while a few had learnt English since they were in the primary school. I found that those students who had had some kind of training of the English language in their home countries were able to bring in their previous knowledge into the discussion. For example, Hajiri and Auday used this approach when trying to explain the meaning of the word 'mythology' to their group members.

Hajiri : Do you study literature? You know literature … Greek mythology…about gods and goddesses.
While Auday said : It (mythology) is like science – psychology, sociology – what people believe in.

Besides previous knowledge, students also brought in their knowledge of the world. This was most conspicuous when Auday tried to enlighten his group members on the word 'former'. He linked this word to the situation that took place in Soviet Union when the government had crumbled and was replaced by Russia. These instances show the importance for learners to be able to assimilate new knowledge into their schemata because it gives them greater understanding of the newly-acquired input. And when learners are placed together in a group, they would be able to share this knowledge and improve each other's

understanding. Thus, the knowledge acquired does not only benefit one individual learner but a bigger number of students through this 'sharing' process.

iii.   Group members as **'Guide'**

Group work does not only allow students to supply or share the answers with their mates but also provides opportunities for students to be a 'guide' in the group. This is because sometimes students will direct or pinpoint to their group members the crucial clues that suggest the answers. This point was highlighted by one of the students, Amra, in her journal, "I found that some of the members tried to explain the word and pointed the clue for the vocabulary." For example, Hajiri directed his friends to the clues to get the meaning of the word 'ancestry'.

Hajiri: the native style…look at paragraph 4. (He reads aloud) Do you have any idea about this? Try to look for the example of the clue.
(Others follow his instructions).
Amra : Ya…here it is…'*In celebration of their Hawaiian ancestry, Islanders might dress in traditional clothes such as loose dresses called muumuus or colourful shirts.'*

As students discussed in their group, they were actually training to negotiate with each other and in this case, it is a negotiation of meaning. I noticed that there were a few students who were very persistent that they made more than one attempt to convince their group mates. One such case was Auday who tried relentlessly to convey his ideas. They were discussing the word 'omitted'.

First attempt
Auday : it means absent…means the number…(lost for words to describe) (Lin read the sentence)
Second attempt
Auday explained to Salma: you see the word… (He translated the word into Arabic)
Third attempt
Auday: In a list of numbers…number 13 is not listed…
Lin   : Ha!!! Not included…

In another instance, Auday tried to decipher the meaning of the word 'former'.

First attempt
Auday : something was … former Soviet Union…Russia…you know Russia? (He asked Manesha. He spelt 'RUSSIA'.)
When his friends were silent, he tried again.
Second attempt
Auday : Do you know Gorbachev?
Manesha: No…
Third attempt
Auday : (He reread the sentence)…I think it means the past…(He gave Tajikistan as an example).
Manesha : Ya…the past.

iv.   Group members as **'Consultant'**

Besides negotiating, it was obvious that students were also building their own hypothesis on the answers and they were clarifying these guesses by consulting their friends. I noticed this when I was observing Lubna's group. They were discussing the word 'emerge'.

Lubna   : Is it appear?
Farishda : come out from somewhere
Lubna   : Yes! Come out
Everybody agrees: Yes…

Another example was when Mariam's group was discussing the word 'spinster'.

Zarina   : I think it means 'woman not married'
Mariam : Are you sure?
Zakiyah : Yes…it's correct.

These examples clearly show how students become dependent on each other when they work in groups.

Other advantages of group work

Students' perspective

Many of the respondents mentioned their preference for group work than individual work. Each learner has his or her own reasons for it. For instance, Amal mentioned in her journal that, "Discussion with our friends can help our minds to be active. Also we can check our opinion in choosing the best meaning for the vocabulary." She further added, "We cannot see our mistakes if we study alone." Another respondent, Manesha, also voiced the same opinion. She wrote in her journal, "I can easily discuss with my partners and express my opinion because all of us (in my group) are at the same level. This point makes me happy and comfortable." Samiya also voiced the same opinion. She stated in her journal, "The discussion in our class is good for us. We can get more knowledge from each member in our group. We can know more than one word at one time. It's better than if we study alone and we can know our mistakes and new vocabulary. That's why in our Reading class we never use the dictionary." Another idea was highlighted by Lin during my second interview with her when she informed me that group work saves a lot of her time than if she were to do the task all by herself.

Teacher's perspective

During my observation on the students' discussions I noticed a very glaring interdependency among the students in various aspects. Not only were they able to assist each other in getting the meaning of the words but they also helped one another in other aspects of the language. I realized that besides getting the meanings of the words, students also learn the spelling from their friends. For example, Zarina was trying to explain the meaning of 'roasting' to her group mates.

Zarina : burning
Zakiyah: How to spell burning? Burne…
Zarina & Liza : No…no…there's no 'e'.

She did not only provide the meaning but also the spelling. In her journal Zarina also mentioned this point. She stated, "I like group work…We can help each other if we do not know how to spell the word." There were many of these instances I observed in the groups, like when Lin helped Salma to spell 'rejected', and when Zakiyah helped to spell 'previous' to her group members. Another respondent, Dayang, wrote in her journal that, "…study in groups makes us realize our common mistakes, whether to spell, to pronounce, to make sentences or to define any word." And there are many more students who share the same view as evident in their journals.

Besides that, some students also reported that collaborative group work helped them to improve their reading, listening and speaking skills. For instance, Manesha recorded in her journal that, "I agree with this method and found it useful. When we try to find the meaning of words, we explain to each other and it improves our speaking." In addition, during my interview with Asma', when I asked for her opinion on the group work, she mentioned that "[It helped me] in getting the meaning and the spelling. Sometimes when Hajiri read the paragraph, it can improve the listening." In Asma's case, I learnt that the pre-reading the students did before their discussion helped her to get the correct pronunciation of certain words. Another student, Azfa, also shared the same view. Below is an excerpt of my interview with her.

Teacher : Give me your honest opinion regarding the group work.
Azfa   : My opinion about the group work…I could improve my English language…then I can get many words that I don't know…I can improve my English in speaking.
Teacher : How? Give example.
Azfa   : For example, I listen to new words in the speaking…if I see the word suitable in the speaking then I can use the words in the writing…

Based on the feedback I received from the students, I found that the collaborative group work did not only help them to improve their vocabulary knowledge but also other aspects of the language such as in getting the correct spelling, the proper intonation in reading and the suitable pronunciation in speaking.

5.0   Discussion

The results from this research clearly indicate that collaborative group work is a very effective approach in teaching vocabulary as compared to individual work and whole-class method. The results from the t-test clearly show the significant improvement made by learners in their vocabulary knowledge. Furthermore, it enables the learners to be engaged in positive interaction among themselves. When students are actively involved in group discussions, it will indirectly enhance their confidence to speak in front of their colleagues (Oxford, 2003). In other words, the group acts as a platform for the students to overcome their anxiety and build their oratory skill. This finding corresponds with that of Leung (2008) and Nash & Snowling (2006). Both studies reported similar results that the interactivity of collaborative learning resulted in the greatest gains in word knowledge. Furthermore, the studies also stressed the importance of group interactivity as a scaffold toward developing independent learners.

During the group work discussion sessions, students take up different multifaceted roles in assisting their group mates. Sometimes they are the 'motivator', 'problem-solver', 'guide' and 'consultant'. This interdependency will eventually create a very positive and effective climate among the group members. They will not feel threatened or intimidated with each other's presence, instead they will mutually cooperate to help each other's understanding of the task. Furthermore, as Foster (1998) pointed out, "Nonnative speakers use interactional adjustments to generate comprehensible input" (p.19), and this explains the different roles that the students display when they see that there is a gap in their communication. This result is in accord with the suggestion made by Allwright (1983) that classroom learning should be made pedagogically engaging since it acts as a bridge between social skills that students have already acquired and those that are needed in the real world.

The collaborative group work does not only help learners to improve their vocabulary knowledge but indirectly it also brings about an improvement in other language areas such as the spelling, reading, listening and speaking. Moreover, the group interactions are a good platform to train students to communicate effectively. As shown in this study, when students were discussing the meanings of words, they were also learning to agree, disagree, develop hypotheses, negotiate, suggest etc. among themselves. These skills are crucial communication skills in real-life situations. Thus, when teachers allow students to work collaboratively in their groups, they are actually providing an avenue for students to resolve some problems pertaining to other entities of the language and simultaneously enhance their communication

skills. These findings concur with the idea propounded by Long & Porter (1985) who highlighted the importance of equipping learners with skills of communication such as negotiating, clarifying, inferring, hypothesizing, disagreeing etc. as these skills are crucial in developing socially-adept individuals.

Nevertheless, in placing learners in their groups, teachers should be sensitive to the group dynamics. They need to be alert of certain signs or cues produced by the learners, which might be indications of their incompatibility as a group. This is very crucial to determine whether the learners can work with one another and achieve the objective of the task. Their incompatibility could be a result of gender preferences or a dislike for certain individuals and a preference for others as their close friends. Besides that, teachers should always monitor and create an equilibrium between those students who are either very domineering in the group or those who are too passive. Some students tend to be very dominant in their groups. They tend to control the whole discussion and refuse to accept opinions by the other members. On the other hand, there are students who are very passive in the groups. Teachers should beware of these two extreme types of learners.

6.0   Conclusion

The key findings from the research revealed that students did make an improvement in their vocabulary knowledge after they had studied collaboratively. This was clearly indicated by the results of the t-test. Student collaboration was found to be an effective technique in teaching vocabulary because learners were able to help each other in deciphering meanings of words in context. Moreover, their interaction during the discussion helped them to improve in other language skills such as reading, listening and speaking. Besides that, the group work gave students opportunities to participate in their own learning, build their self-confidence in interacting with their group members and cultivate a sharing attitude among them. Indeed, this study clearly depicts the importance of vocabulary in learning English language and efforts should be taken to promote direct teaching of vocabulary skills in the classes among other language skills via the collaborative learning approach.

7.0   References

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