INCREASING CONFIDENCE TO DECREASE RETICENCE: A QUALITATIVE ACTION RESEARCH IN SECOND LANGUAGE EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT
This study reports on an action research on increasing the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students' confidence in speaking. Participants involved in this study were 16 male university students who had an upper-intermediate level of English. Extra speaking activities were incorporated into the classroom for 8 successive weeks. Insights into the students' confidence development were gained through qualitative analysis of their reflective journals. The findings of this study suggest that second language teachers should seek ways to increase students' collaboration in the classroom to help them gain confidence in speaking.

KEYWORDS: Action research; qualitative analysis; reflective journal; student confidence; EFL students.

INTRODUCTION
Most of the researchers in the field of second/foreign language (L2) teaching believe that speaking skills are an important part of the curriculum in language teaching and the ability to speak in a foreign language is at the very heart of what it means to be able to use a foreign language (e.g., Biggs & Moore, 1993; Liu, 2001; Tsou, 2005; Tsui, 1992; Van den Branden, Bygate, & Norris, 2009). This assumption relies on two aspects. First, our personality, our self-image, our knowledge of the world and our ability to reason and express our thoughts are all reflected in our spoken performance in a foreign language. Being able to speak to friends, colleagues, visitors and even strangers, in their language or in a language which both speakers can understand, is surely the goal of many L2 learners.
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Luoma, 2004). Second, the relationship between students' classroom participation and their academic achievement is undeniable (e.g., Krupa-Kwiatkowski, 1998; Meng, 2009). As Meng (2009, p. 220) asserts, developing students' speaking skills result in "a very productive learning environment". The importance of the ability or perception of ability to speak should not therefore be underestimated by either teacher or pupil (Turner, 2010).

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

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

Why conduct an action research for this study? Given that I sought to inform my own teaching practice with the research –particularly with my classroom context – it was clear that an action research project would be the most suitable for my purposes. It is more practical and user-friendly than research defined in traditional senses. In other words, it does not necessitate some essential features of the quantitative research design such as sizable sample of participants or time limitations. Wallace (1998, p. 1) defines action
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research as "the systematic collection and analysis of data relating to the improvement of some aspect of professional practice". He claims that teachers of language should involve themselves in "action research" based on this fact that most teachers would like to develop their expertise progressively while they continue in their chosen occupation. On the whole, due to its less formal nature, teachers will find action research by far the most appropriate form of research to conduct in professional contexts.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

**Confidence in Second Language**

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

An important strand of research in second language acquisition has investigated the relationship between reticence and confidence. Riasati (2014), in his recent review of literature on reticence, argues that reticence has a detrimental effect on the L2 learning process. He believes that this is why many different researchers have made use of various ways of identifying students' reasons of reticence. In order to understand why some language learners choose to remain silent in language classrooms, these researchers have employed interviews, observations, and journals. Dwyer and Heller-Murphy (1996), for example, conducted interviews with six Japanese students to identify sources of reticence among these learners. It was found that the students were reticent due to several reasons, including lack of self-confidence. Similar findings were achieved by Li and Liu (2011) who investigated the issue of reticence in China. They assert that many Chinese learners prefer to remain silent in language learning contexts. A range of factors are identified as leading to reticence among which is lack of self-confidence. However, they believe that "through more personal engagement with class activities, it is expected that both students’ confidence and their ability to speak English will be improved" (Li & Liu, 2011, p. 961).

Many previous studies have shown that there is a direct relationship between students' confidence and their speaking behavior in L2. For example, Lai (1994) attempted to identify Hong Kong secondary students' level of confidence in using English and the factors leading to different confidence levels in oral participation in classrooms. The findings show that most of the subjects "felt a lack of confidence in using English as a means of
communication in the classroom" (Lai, 1994, p. 122). In another study, Maclntyre et al. (1998) suggest that self-confidence significantly contributes to the learner's willingness to communicate in a foreign language. According to them, affective factors such as motivation, personality, intergroup climate, and self-confidence underlie willingness to communicate, and the factor of self-confidence including overall self-confidence in L2 and situational self-confidence in communication play an important role in determining the learner's willingness to communicate. Yashima et al. (2004) cite a study of high school students who traveled abroad to study English. Some students were not ready to communicate due to some factors, including lack of L2 confidence, and found themselves in an endless cycle; needing to communicate with native speakers to gain L2 confidence, but due to a lack of confidence, unable to initiate interactions. Cao (2011), in a recent study, investigated the willingness to communicate about a group of international students studying EAP (English for Academic Purposes) during one academic year at a New Zealand university. She suggests that three dimensions overlap and interrelate in order to inhibit or facilitate learners' willingness to communicate: First, individual characteristics, including self-confidence; second, classroom environmental conditions, such as topic; and third, linguistic factors. Thus an ecological perspective is drawn, whereby an individual is seen as interacting in a complex fashion with his/her environment.

Due to its negative effects, some researchers in their studies attempted to propose solutions for students' lack of confidence in L2 classrooms. A study conducted by Burden (2004) reveals that almost 70% of 289 university freshmen surveyed felt unconfident speaking English. Burden (2004) thus suggested teachers use cooperative as opposed to competitive goal structures as a means of creating interdependencies between learners to increase their self-confidence. Ewald (2007) reports that only about half of the students in her study claimed to experience a relative level of confidence in their upper-level classes. She then suggested that teachers work actively to build upper-level students' confidence through encouraging them. In her words, "convince them that the challenge of learning to use a foreign language is not outside their grasp. Assure them that mistakes are normal and expected and that even through flawed participation they learn" (Ewald, 2007, p. 134).

**Action Research in Second Language**

In recent years, applied linguists have focused their attention on L2 teacher education and practice (Lazaraton & Ishihara, 2005). Since the literature has tended to focus on teacher development far more than teacher training, classroom discourse has been a focus of interest for quite some time. For example, Edge (2005) argues that, at present, ELT teachers are no longer required to apply a particular theory or use a particular method in their teaching. Instead, they should be responsive and responsible for examining their teaching context to gain a deeper understanding of their own work. This process of open, continuing development creates an institution which is an environment that caters for learning, collaboration, and growth. Richards and Farrell (2005) also make the distinction between teacher training and teacher development. They argue that the former deals with basic concepts, strategies, and methodology, and therefore aims at short-term and immediate goals while the latter aims at helping teachers understand themselves and their teaching. Through reflective analysis of teaching practices, examining beliefs, values and
principles, sharing with colleagues, and keeping up-to-date with new trends and theories, they believe that teachers can engage in professional development. One of the main themes that is part of this broader movement in L2 education is action research (e.g., Crookes & Chandler, 2001; McDonough, 2006; Smith, 2005; Thorne & Qiang, 1996).

Although definitions of action research vary, there are some typical features associated with it, which were summarized by Burns (1999, p. 30) as follows:

- **Action research is contextual, small-scale and localized** – it identifies and investigates problems within a specific situation.
- **It is evaluative and reflective** as it aims to bring about change and improvement in practice.
- **It is participatory** as it provides for collaborative investigation by teams of colleagues, practitioners and researchers.
- **Changes in practice are based on the collection of information or data which provides the impetus for change.**

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

The process of action research, if conducted systematically and extensively, enables the construction of teacher-generated knowledge, thus empowering teachers as the creators and not just the holders of such knowledge (Johnson, 1996). However, more recent approaches to action research in L2 have emphasized its contribution to an individual teacher's professional self-development rather than its potential to initiate large-scale reform (Rainey, 2000). In other words, action research has been regarded favorably because it can help teachers develop in-depth perspectives about the process of teaching and learning (Lacorte & Krastel, 2002). In addition, action research can help L2 teachers recognize the importance of learning how to seek answers to their questions (Tedick & Walker, 1995), develop personal theories about L2 learning (Crookes, 1997), and redefine relationships among learners, teachers, and researchers in ways that enhance the effectiveness of their instructional practices (Nunan, 1992). Thus, since the issue of teacher development has become central to the field of L2 teacher education (Edge, 2005; Richards & Farrell, 2005), action research has gained its reputation as a reliable tool to this end.
PROBLEM AND AIM OF THE STUDY
The problem I identified in my classroom was that most of my students were not actively engaged during the class and did not speak most of the time. Following informal talks with my students, I discovered that most of them had problems with speaking English. Investigating students’ attitudes toward learning English, I asked the question: “Which skill do you want to improve the most?” I found that most of them wanted to improve speaking but they did not have the courage to express their ideas. In other words, they wanted to speak but they lacked confidence to speak. While language teachers often teach based on informal analyses of their learners’ needs (Tarone & Yule, 1989), however, it was my hypothesis that informal conversation was not enough to confirm that students lacked confidence in order to speak. So I decided to investigate students’ attitudes toward speaking skills through collecting data from a needs analysis questionnaire (see Appendix A) I had designed for this purpose. The needs analysis revealed that most of the students were really interested in speaking but they had low confidence in speaking English. Further, the data showed that the students attributed their inability to speak English confidently to the lack of speaking experience and/or opportunities to engage in L2 conversation inside the classroom. Thus, the key research questions that form the basis of the present action research were as follows:

Can I help my students to improve their confidence in speaking in the classroom by providing them with additional speaking materials and encouraging them to engage in pair/group work speaking activities?

How, and in what ways, did the present action research project help me to become an autonomous teacher?

METHODOLOGY
Participants
Participants involved in this study were the EFL learners from an intact class who voluntarily participated in the study and formed a convenience sample. The main reason for adopting this sampling strategy for the present study is that it usually results in willing participants, which is a prerequisite to having a rich data set (Dornyei, 2007). In addition, the use of intact classes has the advantage of enhancing the face validity of classroom research (Mackey & Gass, 2005).

The participants were 16 university students at BA level from different fields of study (i.e., management, physics, law, and physical education) who had participated in a general English classroom in a private English language teaching institute in Babolsar, northern Iran. Their native language was Farsi. They were all males and were between 19 and 22 years old. The students had an upper-intermediate level of English, as determined by their TOEFL test taken by the institute. They had two 120-minute language sessions per week over a 10-week semester.

The students had studied English as a school subject for 6 years at junior and senior high schools. All of the students had been studying English at the same institute during the last
14 months. Prior to the study, all the participants agreed to sign the consent form which indicated that the study involved their English-learning experiences. To preserve their privacy, pseudonyms were used when presenting the results.

**Context**
The participants in this study had a reasonable knowledge of English grammar but were reticent to speak or produce the target language. According to Jahangard (2007), one of the main reasons that contribute to Iranian students' inability to speak English is that students' aural and oral skills are not emphasized in Iranian prescribed EFL textbooks, especially at high school. In his words, "there is no section in the lessons specifically designed to develop and enhance listening skills in the learners... Speaking skill is also taken into account though indirectly and as a marginal activity" (Jahangard, 2007, p. 146). These skills are not tested in the university entrance examination, as well as in the final exams during the three years of senior high school and one year of pre-university education. Teachers put much less emphasis, if any, on oral drills, listening and speaking abilities than on reading, writing, grammar and vocabulary. The main focus is to make students pass tests and exams, and because productive abilities of students are not tested, most teachers then skip the oral drills in the prescribed books. Thus, it is not surprising to see that the participants in this study, even at the university level, lack the necessary skills to be able to use English communicatively (Farhady, Jafarpoor, & Birjandi, 1994).

**Material**
Many previous studies have shown that L2 students' lack of confidence is attributed to their lack of speaking practice (e.g., Benson, 1991; Biggs, 1994; Schneider, 2001). For example, Kubo (2009) claims that the lack of opportunity to practice speaking is one of the main factors that results in lack of confidence in students. In this way, since I wanted to increase the students' confidence in speaking, they had to have more opportunity to practice speaking together with their friends. Thus, I made use of one of the authoritative books on speaking on the market in which activities were based on real-world events. *Speaking Extra* (Gammidge, 2004) is a resource book containing photocopiable materials for supplementary classroom work. The book helps the learners "to speak with confidence to carry out the most basic social transactions" (Gammidge, 2004, p. 7).

**Procedure**
I started incorporating extra speaking activities into the classroom from week 3 to the end of the semester (covering 16 sessions during 8 weeks). Thirty minutes of each session were devoted to extra speaking activities. The ordinary technique used in the book to engage students in speaking was "interview". In this technique, one learner was usually asked questions by one or several interviewers. As Meng (2009) asserts, "this strategy [technique] is useful for keeping a conversation going and is a worthwhile speaking activity" (p. 220).

**Data type**
Data sources included in the present study were reflective journals in order to gain a rich understanding of the participants' confidence development and of the impact of the
extracurricular speaking activities on that development. It is described in detail in the following.

**Reflective journals**

It may come to the mind why reflective journals have been chosen as the sole method of data gathering. We should note that confidence is an internal psychological quality that is hard to measure externally. In addition, students’ perception of their self-confidence is deemed to be worthy of consideration. Thus, the students were asked to record their thoughts about their L2 classroom experiences weekly for 8 successive weeks, making a minimum of two entries per week. I did not predetermine the number of required journal entries, but allowed the students to establish the minimum requirement through negotiation and consensus. The students started journal writing at the third week and continued to the tenth week. In addition to prompts related to the focal topics (e.g., level of participation and confidence in each lesson and, reasons for being reticent and feeling unconfident), the students were encouraged to write about their language-learning experiences in either English or Farsi (their first language) to help them feel more relaxed and write more freely. The Farsi texts were then translated into English by the researcher. We also agreed that I would not read their journals until after the course grades had been submitted, in order to allay any of their concerns that negative comments about their experiences or classroom context might affect their grades. Each student made from 16 to 28 entries in his pen and paper reflective journal, and the average entry length was 150 words with a range of 90 to 350 words.

**Findings**

**Results of Reflective Journals**

As is typical in qualitative research, an inductive approach was adopted so that themes emerged from the data (Creswell, 2003; Rossman & Rallis, 1998). To begin, I read the entire corpus and coded chunks of text to make the data manageable. Then, I reduced and simplified the coded data while highlighting special features of certain data segments in order to link them to broader concepts. I coded and recoded the data several times until the initial descriptive and low-inference codes were gradually replaced by higher-order ones. As a result of revisiting the data a number of times, the data revealed three general themes that illustrated the students’ impressions about the extra speaking activities and their participation in these activities. The three main themes concerned changes in the students’ perceptions about extra speaking activities, their perceptions about collaboration, and their perceptions about their self-confidence. The findings related to each theme, with representative comments from the students’ writings that exemplify each theme, are presented in the following sections. The representative comments are samples from all the comments reflecting a particular theme and are not meant to give an exhaustive view of all comments on that theme.

**Students’ Perceptions about Extra Speaking Activities**

In terms of their perceptions about extra speaking activities, the students began their course with a fairly narrow conception of such activities but gained a broader perspective by the end of the semester. Several students regarded the interview technique as a difficult
speaking activity that required considerable speaking skills. For example, Siavosh wrote in a journal entry that "to me, interview means something very hard and complicated. One will need some training before he can start doing such an activity". However, by the end of the semester, the students had realized that there were many different ways to conduct an interview and that they were not required to control the structure of the task meticulously. Their broadened view of the interview task was also evident in their comments about the usefulness of this activity. For example, Bijan admitted in his first journal entry that he often questioned whether the activity had any impact on students’ speaking ability. Ali also had doubts about the usefulness of it, as he explained in his fourth journal entry "interview is good for speaking development but I think it might be a little bit difficult for us at this level". However, later in the semester, they both pointed out in their journal entries how the interview activity could be useful.

Although the students’ perceptions became more positive as they practiced interviewing, they had some questions about its practicality. Bijan wrote in his journal that "it seems this activity is not still a reliable form of speaking activity". Even though he acknowledged the usefulness of interview activity, he felt that it "was not really practical". Similarly, Siavosh wrote in a journal entry that interviewing was desirable for language teachers in a classroom context, since they could divide students into pairs or groups, but it might not be "fair" to say that it is useful in real world situations. After three weeks of doing the interview activity, Ali questioned whether it was appropriate for such an activity as it was not based on their real world needs; that is, it did not seem "very natural".

**Students’ Perceptions about Collaboration**

The second finding that emerged from the data was that the students gained an appreciation for peer collaboration by the end of the semester. Several students expressed reservations about the collaborative focus of the extra speaking activities in their early journal entries because they believed that collaboration challenged their individuality. For example, Mohsen wrote the following in his journal entry:

I don’t like to do things in groups. So these collaborative speaking activities give me a headache...but maybe it's not that I hate collaborating, it’s more that I hate the idea of collaborating for this class. Because there's no one with a similar personality that I want to work with. I don’t know. I just want to do it by myself.

Ali expressed very similar concerns in his reflective journal, as illustrated by the following excerpt:

After doing the speaking activities, I’m not sure how powerful or useful the collaboration would be because different people have different situations. I don’t know if my classmates can give me really useful and insightful suggestions or advice about my speaking ability. I'm used to working alone.
Despite their initially negative views about collaboration, all of the students carried out collaborative extra speaking activities with their peers during the term and regularly wrote in their journal entries about their positive experiences conducting in-class peer activities. They wrote in their reflective journals that their views about peer collaboration had become much more positive. For example, Jamshid admitted that in the past he had not been "overly impressed with how group work usually works out" but that in this term he could "actually see how the group work was beneficial". Similarly, Mehran stated that his negative ideas about collaborating with classroom peers at the beginning of the semester were "totally wrong". He discovered that peer collaboration gave him "different perspectives and insight into the speaking ability... and more space to practice speaking".

Although the students initially expressed doubts about the value of peer collaboration, their perceptions about collaboration were unanimously positive by the end of the semester. Kaveh wrote in his reflective journal that when he looked back over the semester, he realized "we were collaborating with each other all the time!" Arash pointed out in one of his late entries that many of the benefits he gained in the class came from collaborative work with his peers and classmates, and that collaboration was "a true asset to improving one's speaking". Jafar acknowledged the important role that peer collaboration had played in his positive feeling toward speaking activities. He explained that he had "learned a lot from my [his] classmates...this motivated me to devote myself to doing group work".

**Students' Perceptions about Self-confidence**

The third theme that emerged in the data was that the students attributed the improvement of their confidence to improving their speaking abilities. The early journal entries are filled with statements that show the students' lack of confidence. Students attributed this lack of confidence to their awareness of two major factors: lack of grammatical accuracy and classmates' perceived ability. For example, Arash in one of his early entries explained that he did not feel confident because he was aware of his own grammatical mistakes. He wrote "I know when I speak I'm normally wrong and this makes me feel ashamed". Hamed had the same problem and expressed his lack of confidence in this way:

> I find it hard to express my thoughts and ideas many times and I know that I make many mistakes with my grammar. Therefore, I never feel confident in the class...I never feel too confident about my grammar but I'm usually confident in my ideas and what I want to say. I usually feel that I have good ideas to share with others but when I try to communicate my ideas I lack confidence.

Yet, some students pointed to the knowledge and abilities of fellow classmates as a cause of their lack of confidence. For example, Kaveh complains that:

> When I was younger and started studying English, I felt more confident because I could understand everything but my classmates...
in the classroom couldn't. But now that we all understand, I feel it is frightening. I feel sure of myself but when I see that there are many people who are better speakers than me, then I feel I'm not confident enough to speak.

Although the majority of the students expressed similar views about their lack of confidence in their journal entries, their later journal entries showed that their self-confidence had improved due to collaboration and doing extra speaking activities. Siavosh claimed that "I didn't have confidence to speak with my peers in speaking activities at the beginning...but now automatically I participate in the activities and feel comfortable to express my thoughts”. In the same way, Mehran reported that "I never felt quite sure of myself before but now I feel confident when I speak. I think this is because there were more opportunities to speak English. We had more chances to speak English”. Kaveh expressed the same feeling and wrote in his journal:

I feel more confident now about my language ability than ever before. We were glad when we kept conversation going. When we were interviewing each other, it was interesting and we laughed... [We could] improve our friendship. You know you can gain confidence when you could talk with your partner in this way.

**DISCUSSION**

The students' reflective journal writings generally indicate that incorporating extra speaking activities into the classroom had a positive impact on the students' confidence development by broadening their perceptions about speaking, helping them recognize the value of peer collaboration, and encouraging them to participate in new collaborative speaking activities. The findings show that most students reported increases in all aspects of confidence, lending legitimacy to the claim that extensive pair/group work speaking activities result in students' heightened sense of confidence in L2 speaking.

The results are in line with previous research. In other words, many preceding researchers have emphasized that the first step in increasing confidence in L2 classrooms is to actually have students participate in speaking tasks. In his study in a Japanese context, Dailey (2009) declares that English teachers in Japan are entangled in a downward spiral where insufficient speaking practice contributes to low speaking proficiency which, in turn, affects self-confidence. To remedy this problem, he designed a one-year "English through Acting" class action research in which a variety of drama-based activities including interactive communication and cooperative group/pair work were introduced to a group of 13 Japanese college students. The results showed that these activities provided exciting opportunities to speak English and helped students increase their confidence. Tong (2010) attempted to investigate 181 students' oral participation behavior in some junior secondary classrooms of English in Hong Kong. Data collected through the study such as classroom observation notes, video transcriptions, student interviews and informal conversations were analyzed. His findings showed that while pair or group work was in progress, students could ask teachers questions or clarify items with the teachers.
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comfortably. Students talked softly among themselves and whispered with their peers. The students gave a complete answer to teachers’ questions in a collective way. He believes that these behaviors constitute evidence of students’ joint efforts to solve problems, and this will boost their confidence to speak out. In a recent study in an Iranian context, Khany and Ghoreyshi (2013) sought to explore the extent to which Iranian EFL students’ personality traits influenced their foreign language speaking confidence in the classrooms. To do so, "Foreign Language Speaking Confidence Scale" for measuring students' confidence and "Big Five Inventory Scale" to measure learners' personality traits were applied to 217 Iranian EFL learners to collect the data. Their results proved that attempting to integrate and use the target language had a positive impact on students' confidence.

Lessons I learned from doing Action Research

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

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

Second, doing action research provides L2 teachers with the knowledge and skill that can help them develop research skills (McDonough, 2006; Thorne & Qiang, 1996) required to become autonomous. In line with the previous research, the present action research study had the same impact on me. During the action research project I moved into an examination of various data collection techniques, including case studies, audio and video
techniques, teacher and learner diaries, questionnaires, interviewing, and classroom observation sheets. I studied authentic examples of each type of data, with two aims: firstly, to find out what sort of material is the best one to collect from my own classroom, and what that material can reveal about encouraging students to engage in additional pair/group work speaking activities; secondly, to equip myself with the skills necessary to construct my own data-collecting instruments (i.e., Appendix A).

Finally, action research gives teachers the knowledge and confidence to act as responsible professionals. For example, Elyildirim and Ashton (2006) claim that action research can improve the current L2 teaching situation in terms of boosting teachers’ professional development, teacher training and presenting to an institution evidence of the need for change. In this way, I was eager to participate in this action research project for my own professional development. Professional development in this study involved a continuous procedure in a productive way to give me the opportunity to learn about the confidence engage in collaborative dialogue with students about their lack of confidence, study instructional practices and methodologies related to this topic, and trouble shoot the specific problem. I feel that I am now better equipped to consciously reflect on the problems of my particular situation, and on the applicability of the theories I have learned. As a result, I am more confident about what to teach, how to teach, and why to teach in such a way. Through conducting this action research project, I had an opportunity to develop my professional autonomy, and to initiate a number of useful classroom activities and techniques which I would otherwise have been unlikely to attempt.

**CONCLUSION**

This research project combined two areas in L2 teaching profession – students’ confidence in speaking English in EFL classrooms and teachers’ practical, classroom-based action research – both of which have been recognized "as not only being of importance, but also as areas in which there is still much progress to be made" (Curtis, 2001, p. 69). In this action research project, extra speaking activities were incorporated into the classroom to increase the students’ performance in terms of pair/group work. Although teacher-centered instruction, typically utilizing little interaction in English, is the most common in EFL classrooms; this study showed that an instructional methodology stressing peer collaboration as a tool for increasing the ability of the students to speak is likely to result in confidence. The findings of this study suggest that L2 instructors should seek ways to include students’ collaboration in the subject language as part of their curriculum design to help them gain confidence in speaking L2.
Appendix A: A Sample of Needs Analysis Questionnaire
(Adapted from Griffee, 1997; Nunan, 1998)

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

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

3) Do you like to learn English by: Cassette  Games  Conversation  Studying English books  Watching T.V.

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

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

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

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

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

9) Do you feel happy when you speak English? Yes  No

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

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

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

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

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

References


Increasing Confidence to Decrease Reticence
Rahmani Doqaruni


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**Biographical note:**

Vahid Rahmani Doqaruni holds a BA in English Language and Literature from Sabzevar Teacher Training University and an MA in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) from Mazandaran University, both in Iran. He is currently a Ph.D. candidate in TEFL at Ferdowsi University of Mashhad and a lecturer in English Language and Literature at University of Gonabad, Iran. He has published papers on various subjects in the field of second language education in national and international journals. His major research interests are: teacher education, second language writing, action research, mixed methods research and task-based language teaching.