

# Individual and Collaborative Output Tasks: Effects on the Acquisition of English Inversion Structures

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## **Abstract**

This study investigated the effectiveness of individual and collaborative output-based focus-on-form instructional tasks on the acquisition of English inversion structures by EFL learners. Moreover, it explored the developmental trend of learners' inversion acquisition. To this end, 60 homogeneous EFL learners were assigned to individual and collaborative output groups. They were exposed to texts encompassing inversion structures for 12 instructional sessions. The task included dictogloss in both groups where the texts were reconstructed either individually or collaboratively. A pretest, posttest, and delayed posttest design was used to examine the effects of the 2 tasks. The learners' process of acquisition was examined by parallel tests of inversion development. Results showed that collaborative task implementation was advantageous over individual task performance in both immediate and delayed posttests. Results did not reveal a linear additive process for the collaborative output group; however, the findings suggest that collaborative language production can enhance grammatical acquisition.

**Keywords:** Collaborative Output; Dictogloss; EFL Learners; Individual Output; Inversion Structures

## **1. Introduction**

After an extensive review of the research literature on the teaching and learning of grammar in an L2, it is concluded that purely communicative approaches to grammar teaching is not effective and focus-on-form instruction is needed to draw learners' attention to the forms in the course of meaning-based communication (Macaro, 2003). Over the past two decades, the positive role of focus-on-form in SLA has greatly been recognized. In this regard, Nassaji (2000) argues that focus-on-form helps learners pick the forms they may normally not notice. He further believes that form-focused instruction can affect the order in which the structures are acquired. Nassaji and Fotos (2010) affirm that instead of explicit teaching of a grammatical point, teachers should draw learners' attention to the linguistic forms of the language within a communicative context or task. A number of reviews have

shown that morphosyntactic features can be acquired by form-focused instruction (e.g., Doughty & Williams, 1998; Ellis, 2002; Nassaji & Fotos, 2010).

The interest in focus-on-form partly stems from the suggestion that it can help learners develop linguistic accuracy (Doughty, 2001). Focus-on-form gives learners opportunities to divert their attention from meaning to focus on linguistic forms and notice them in the input; otherwise, forms may remain unnoticed. Such noticing, as Schmidt (1990, 1995, 2001) argues, is necessary for L2 learning. Focus-on-form provides opportunities for “pushed output” through which learners’ are required to produce language which is linguistically accurate (Swain, 1995, 2000; Swain & Lapkin, 1995). For these reasons, focus-on-form is seen as potentially beneficial for L2 learners.

Focus-on-form can be implemented through output-based tasks. Output-based focus-on-form tasks involve encouraging L2 learners to produce language. Through the act of production, learners may find problematic areas and decide what to attend in the input. The production process can be done either individually or collaboratively where peer feedback is also available. The present study, therefore, aimed to investigate the effect of individual and collaborative output on the acquisition of inversion as an English linguistic form.

## **2. Literature Review: Output Enhancement**

The theoretical basis of the importance of output was first proposed by Swain (1985, 1995, 2000) in her comprehensible output hypothesis. Many SLA researchers argue that successful L2 learning does not only require comprehensible input but also comprehensible output (e. g., Izumi & Bigelow, 2000; Izumi, Bigelow, Fujiwara, & Fearnow, 1999; Pica, 1988; Swain & Lapkin, 1995). However, students’ output is sometimes limited as the result of the dominance of teacher talk in traditional classrooms. The proponents of the output-based tasks in the language classroom believe that providing learners with model input that immediately follows their pushed production enhances their sensitivity to the forms. It is hypothesized that learners would attend to form-meaning relationship through this task.

On the role of output in language acquisition, Swain (1995) argues that when learners produce pushed output, they are, in fact, involved in syntactic processing rather than semantic processing prevalent in purely meaning-based tasks. She proposed three roles for output:

1. Noticing: Learners realize that they do not know how to express themselves in the language. In other words, they notice gaps in their knowledge.
2. Hypothesis testing: Learners may formulate and test a hypothesis related to the structure of a TL.

3. Metalinguistic function: Learners' reflection on their own production enables them to internalize the L2 linguistic knowledge and to control it.

Swain (1995) asserts that, in the vocal or subvocal production of L2, "learners may notice a gap between what they want to say and what they can say, leading them to recognize what they do not know, or know only partially" (pp. 125-126). Swain and Lapkin (1995) claim that it is through comparing the original output and the reconstructed one that L2 learning is facilitated. The cognitive process triggered by a pushed output stems in the communicative need engendered by an output task in which learners think about their produced forms. In this regard, Swain and Lapkin (1995) also argue that the cognitive comparison of the original and constructed output during reconstruction tasks is part of the process of language learning.

Many studies, affected by the theoretical underpinnings of the output hypothesis proposed by Swain (1985), have been conducted to examine the effect of output-based focus-on-form on the acquisition of linguistic structures (e.g., Nobuyoshi & Ellis, 1993; Swain & Lapkin, 1995). Takashima (1995), for example, exposed Japanese learners of English to a focus-on-form task to encourage them to modify their output. He found output-oriented treatment positively effective in the acquisition of past-tense forms (i.e., the L2 forms).

Swain (2000) formulated her output hypothesis within the sociocultural theory which asserts that collaboratively oriented scaffolding results in successful task outcome. In the sociocultural theory, learners achieve intersubjectivity by scaffolding each other's attempts to perform tasks that are beyond their individual abilities (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005). Swain argues that any language production is a cognitive activity, mainly when learners use language through collaborative tasks as a problem-solving tool. This opinion made Swain adopt the sociocultural theory in her own research (Ellis, 2000).

Swain (2000) argues that when learners perform output tasks collaboratively, they are involved in social interactions, but whether these interactions contribute to language acquisition is still under investigation. It is claimed that "the coconstruction of a passage allows the learners to notice their strengths and weaknesses when attempting to coproduce the text" (Nassaji, 2000; p. 247).

A number of studies have looked for evidence of L2 learning in the interactions of students during collaborative language production tasks (e.g., Fortune, 2005; Izumi, 2002; Izumi, et al., 1999; Nassaji & Tian, 2010; Reinders, 2009; Swain, 1985; 1995; Swain & Lapkin, 1995; Yoshimura, 2006). Most of these studies have targeted grammar structures and lexical forms. It seems that these

forms are more amenable to output-based focus-on-form studies. However, contradictions are found in the results of these studies which can be attributed to individual factors, task nature as well as task implementation procedure, and the nature of the L2 form under investigation. Some of these factors are even unobservable. Still, the general conclusion is in favor of collaboration in task performance. A few of these studies that looked at collaborative output tasks as language learning techniques are reported below. The educational settings in these studies differ. For example, whereas Kowal and Swain (1994) looked at dictogloss tasks in French immersion classes in Canada, Storch (1998) investigated reconstruction and composition tasks in an Australian ESL context.

In an earlier study, Donato (1994, cited in Ellis, 2012) described the kind of scaffolding employed by groups of university students performing an oral task. His study showed that whereas individual participants in his investigation could not produce a particular grammatical structure, a group of learners could do it by joining forces. He further found that learners' collaborations were frequently followed by independent use of language forms on a later occasion.

Other researchers have also paid attention to the importance of collaborative output in the process of L2 acquisition. Studies by Swain and her colleagues (e.g., Swain & Lapkin, 1998) investigate how task-based collaborative dialog leads to the internalization of grammatical features. Kowal and Swain (1994) and Swain and Lapkin (1998) proposed the use of tasks which required the learners to produce output collaboratively. The authors claimed that the task implementation required the learners to produce output collaboratively. In this way, they verbalized the problems they encountered and facilitated their attention to form through peer feedback.

In a rather recent study, Watanabe and Swain (2007) used a quantitative and qualitative method to explore the effect of patterns of interaction on L2 learning. The tasks performed by the learners consisted of three stages: pair writing, pair comparison (comparison between model and reformulated text), and individual writing. The findings showed that through collaborative patterns of interaction, the learners were more likely to achieve higher posttest scores even despite differences in proficiency levels among the peers.

### **3. Purpose of the Study**

Whereas some studies (e.g., Izumi, 2002; Morgan-Short & Bowden, 2006) have addressed the positive effects of output in ESL settings, few studies have been conducted in EFL contexts. The present study purported to investigate the impact of individual and collaborative output on helping EFL learners acquire an English inversion structures. Inversion requires changing the usual word order of subject and verb. The type of inversion in this study involved certain adverbs and adverb

phrases, mostly with a negative or restrictive sense. Such phrases, when placed first in a sentence or clause for emphasis, are followed by the inverted form of the verb. Some of the most common adverbs and adverbial expressions that are followed by inversion are *seldom*, *rarely*, *little*, *nowhere*, *scarcely*, *on no occasion/account/condition*, *in/under no circumstances only after*, *only when*, *not till/until*, *never*, *never before*, *neither/not/so*, and so on. From a pedagogical perspective, inverted forms do not occur frequently in the input (e.g., in teachers' talk or textbooks), and it is a grammatical feature that presents problems to Iranian EFL learners. Inversion is in the domain of word order, and the Persian language is fairly free from word order. Therefore, it is worth trying to investigate the saliency of this form for the learners with Persian as their L1.

Due to the need for research on output-based focus-on-form in an EFL context, this study employed a task-based output-oriented approach known as *dictogloss* to enhance the learners' acquisition of English inversion structures. The differential effects of the two techniques of collaborative and individual dictogloss treatment were examined on the acquisition of inversion structures by university EFL students in this study. The following research questions were addressed:

1. What are the relative effects of individual output and collaborative output tasks on the acquisition of English inversion structures?
2. What are the developmental patterns of acquisition of inversion structures in individual output and collaborative output groups?

#### **4. Method**

##### **4.1 Participants**

First semester students majoring in the English language were selected as the main participants. Two main considerations informed the selection of the first semester students: (a) Focus of the study which was on grammar as one of the first courses to be taught to the students, and (b) lack of explicit/programmed exposure to the L2 structure in the learners' previous high school studies.

A total of 110 adult university students participated in the experiment. At the time of the experiment, the L2 linguistic forms (i.e., the English inversion structures) had not been formally taught to the participants. To ensure that the sample included only participants who had minimal knowledge of the L2 linguistic forms, participants who scored higher than 20% on the pretest were eliminated from the data analysis. The participants were also eliminated from the data analysis in case of failure to attend all the treatment and testing sessions. Of the original pool of 110 participants, 50 were eliminated. Of the remaining 60 participants who did qualify to be included in the analysis, 30 participants randomly belonged to the individual output group and 30 to the collaborative output group. The *t* test was run to determine if there were any differences between the two groups' mean scores on

the pretest measuring learners' knowledge on inversion structures. No significant differences between the groups were observed [ $F(2/58) = 0.79$ ]. All the participants in each group were exposed to treatment in inversion structures.

#### **4.2 Instrumentations**

Dictogloss as a reconstruction task was employed with little variation in its implementation (i.e., individual vs. collaborative reconstruction) in both individual and collaborative output groups. The effectiveness of dictogloss has been explored by Swain and her colleagues (Swain, 2000; Swain & Lapkin, 1998, 2001). These researchers suggest that dictogloss tasks have two functions: promoting meaningful interaction in the L2 and resulting in improvement in accuracy in the use of L2 forms. Kowal and Swain (1994) also found that the production of the L2 during such output-based tasks helped the learners notice gaps in their linguistic knowledge and search for the solution.

Six tests were used to investigate the learners' trend of development: pretest, immediate posttest (IP), delayed posttest (DP) and three in-between the treatment tests. The IP was a version of the pretest with the same content but shuffled item sequences. The order was again reversed in the DP. However, the in-between the treatment tests were the same as the pre and posttest. These test tasks were made to assess the participants' ability to produce the English structure. There were 20 items in each in-between the treatment test: 10 addressing the inversion structure and 10 non-L2 forms. The items were incomplete sentences: The participants were asked to use the verbs provided in parentheses to fill in the blanks with appropriate forms based on situation. Like the texts used as the treatment materials, the tests were highly structured to ensure that the participants would use inversion structures.

#### **4.3 Treatment Procedure**

In each of the 12 sessions, an authentic text passage of approximately 100 words which contained approximately four instances of the L2 structure was presented to the participants to be reconstructed in both individual and collaborative groups. The dictogloss task (adapted from Qin, 2008) involved four steps. In step 1, the instructor introduced the main topic of the text and provided the participants with copies of the model text. As a consciousness-raising task, the instructor reminded the participants to pay attention to the usage of the L2 forms in the text in step 2, the rationale for which derives from the findings that L2 learners tend not to attend to L2 grammatical features during dictogloss activities (Williams, 1999). Then, depending on the treatment type, the participants were asked to reconstruct the text either individually or in groups in step 3. The participants in the individual output group reconstructed the texts individually, whereas those in the collaborative output group reconstructed the texts in groups made up of three participants. In step 4, the participants were given the model text and asked to make notes on the differences between their reconstructed passages and the

original passage (i.e., the model text). They discussed the content and shared their ideas in order to reconstruct the text.

In order to find out what aspects of input the learners noticed as they compared their reconstructed version of the text with the model text, the learners in both groups were asked to recall the areas of differences between the two texts. This phase of the treatment was done in the learners' L1. Using L1 in this free-recall task gave the participants an opportunity to easily write about the ideas without any concern for the form. Figure 1 illustrates the phases of dictogloss, as employed in this study:

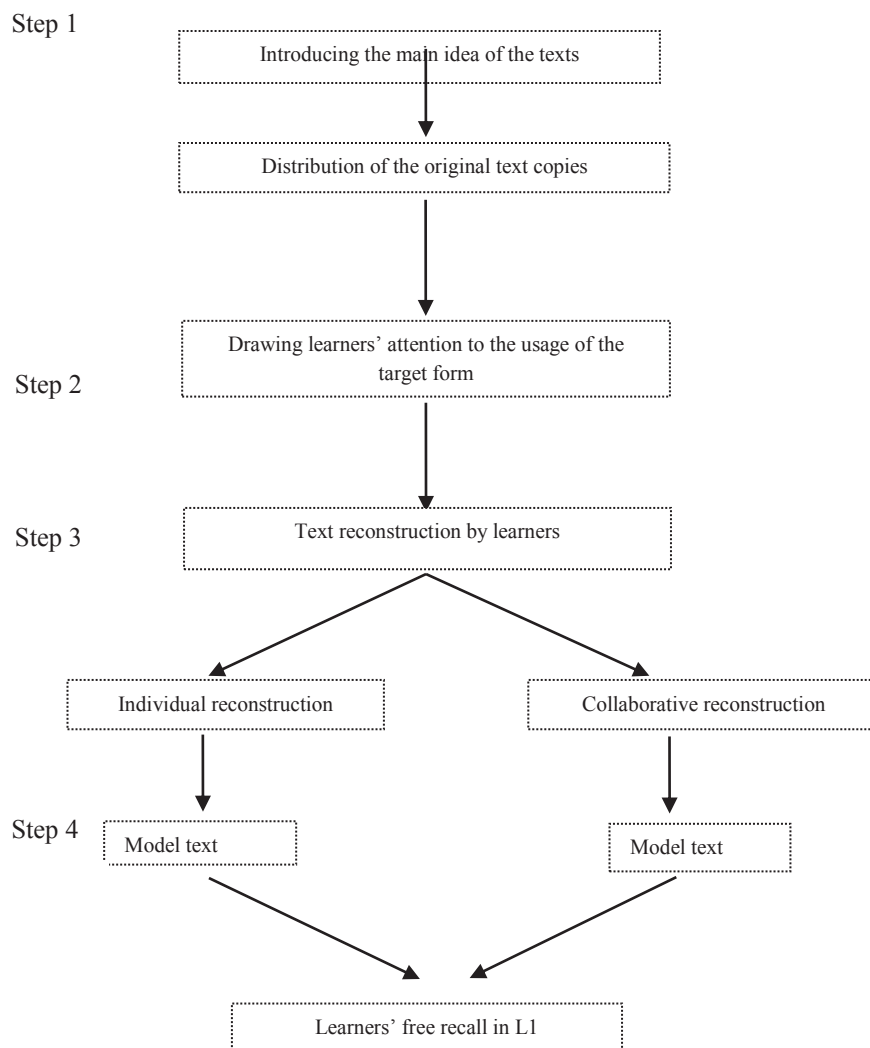


Figure 1. Dictogloss Phases During the Output Treatment

The time allocated to task performance was 50 min in each session. Setting a time limit prohibited the participants to copy the whole content. Due to the infrequency of the L2 forms and no formal instruction on them, the amount of exposure to the forms between the pretest and posttest within a period of four months was minimal. The participants also reported to have no formal grammar instruction on the tested forms from the immediate to the delayed posttest within the three-month interval. A sample of a CO group's reconstructed text from a session of the treatment appears below:

**The model text:** *Never has the mobile phone been more popular among students than it is now. Under no circumstances do they leave their phone at home. Secretly they use it in class. No sooner is the class over than they start calling each other again. Last week some students were found calling during the lecture. Not only did they irritate the lecturer but also the other students. It seems that not until the teacher punishes them do they realize how bad their action is. Only when they are punished do they start using their phones at the right time. I think it should be forbidden.*

**Reconstructed text (session 3):** *Never has the mobile phone has been popular among students . . . . Under no circumstances they leave their mobile at home. They hide mobile in class. No sooner does the class over . . . last week some students found that they are calling each other . . . . It seems that a teacher doesn't punish until do they realize . . . after they are punished do they start . . . . It should forbid.*

The reconstructed text shows signs of the use of inversion structures (e.g., *Never has the mobile . . .*, *No sooner does the class . . .*); however, the sentences were still deficient, and it seemed that the participants were uncertain about the word order. At this stage, the attention was drawn more to get the meaning across and less to the usage of the form.

The researchers traced the performance of the same group throughout the study up until the last session of the treatment. Another reconstructed text belonging to the same group of learners in the final phases of the treatment appears below:

**Reconstructed text (session 10):** *Some students don't have good study habits because of this they aren't successful at university . . . . Seldom do they plan ahead and they leave all the work until the last moment. No sooner do they realize that the exam coming up that it's too late . . . . Not only do they spend too little time under study but they are also effcient . . . . The university has special course for some students like this.*

Although there are still misspellings and reductions in the reconstructed text, the participants seemed to have improved in producing the L2 form.



### 5. Data Collection and Analysis

This study used a time series design. The data collection took place over a 14-week period. The experimental treatment started a week after the pretest session and continued for 12 weeks after which the posttest was administered. To ensure about the retention of the effect of treatment, a delayed posttest was administered three months after termination of the treatment. The two groups were matched for the amount of instructional time. Each test lasted approximately 45 min. The instruction was delivered during the participants' regular class time.

For the purposes of this study, the participants' performance was quantitatively analyzed in terms of developmental stages. Three parallel tests (i.e., T1, T2, and T3) as well as the pretest, the IP, and the DP were designed for this purpose. They were administered after each three sessions of the treatment in order to assess the pattern of development in the study groups. Descriptive statistics were used to measure the means of the groups for the acquisition of inversion structures. An independent samples *t* test was run before the treatment phase to ensure the homogeneity of the study groups in terms of their knowledge of inversion structures. Paired samples *t* tests were run to show the significance of the differences between the means in each pair of tests. Descriptive statistics as well as graphical representation were employed to investigate the developmental trend of the acquisition of inversion structures in the study groups.

### 6. Results

The first research question concerned the relative effectiveness of individual and collaborative output on the acquisition of the inversion structures. Table 1 illustrates the descriptive statistics for the means and SDs of the two groups in the IP as well as the DP. The mean values of the immediate posttest ( $M_{IO} = 1.10$ ;  $M_{CO} = 2.36$ ) shows the advantage of the collaborative output group over the individual output group. This advantage is clearly observed in the case of the DP, too ( $M_{IO} = 1.60$ ;  $M_{CO} = 4.03$ ):

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics for the IP and DP Across the Study Groups*

Group	Time	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
IO	IP	1.100	1.93	.486	.134	2.066
	DP	1.600	1.63	.469	.667	2.533
CO	IP	2.367	2.89	.486	1.401	3.333
	DP	4.033	2.72	.469	3.100	4.966

In order to investigate the significance of the difference between the performances of the participants in the individual and collaborative output groups, independent-samples *t* tests were conducted. Table 2 displays the results of the *t* tests across the pretest and the delayed posttest:

Table 2. *Independent Samples t Test for the Pretest (Pr) and DP*

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		<i>t</i> Test for Equality of Means			
		<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Sig.</i> (2-tailed)	Std. Error Difference
Pr	Equal Variances Assumed	.209	.649	.261	58	.795	.128
	Equal Variances Not Assumed			.261	57.907	.795	.128
DP	Equal Variances Assumed	4.722	.034	-4.199*	58	.000	.580
	Equal Variances Not Assumed			-4.199*	47.450	.000	.580

\*significant at  $p < .05$ 

The results of Levene's test show a nonsignificant mean difference in the pretest ( $p = 0.64$ ) but a significant difference in the DP ( $p = 0.03$ ). An equal variance  $t$  test failed to reveal a statistically reliable difference between the means of the inversion pretest for the participants in the individual output group and collaborative output group ( $t(58) = .261, p = .795$ ). However, in the DP, the difference was highly significant ( $t(58) = 4.19, p < 0.05$ ).

The second research question concerned the developmental trend of inversion acquisition by the participants. The time-series design in this study provided data on the trend of development from the pretest and onset of treatment up to the delayed posttest. Table 3 illustrates the descriptive statistics of the six administered tests. Tracing the development of the means from the pretest to the delayed posttest, one can find an upward additive trend in this process. With the exception of T1 in the individual output group, the minimum mean score is observed in the pretest ( $M_{IO} = .23; M_{CO} = .20$ ), and the maximum mean score appears in the delayed posttest ( $M_{IO} = 1.60; M_{CO} = 4.03$ ):

Table 3. *Descriptive Statistics for the Developmental Trend of Inversion Acquisition*

G	Pretest		T 1		T2		T3		IP		DP	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
IO	.23	.50	.20	.40	.66	1.84	1.06	1.57	1.10	1.93	1.60	1.63
CO	.20	.48	.33	.60	.76	1.63	.56	1.63	2.36	2.89	4.03	2.72

Note: G = Group; IO = Individual Output; CO = Collaborative Output

The mean gain score for the individual output group was 1.37 from the pretest to the DP, whereas in the collaborative output group, the estimated gain score was 3.83. The difference in the gain scores shows the superiority of the learners' performance in the CO group. Table 3 illustrates that as the means of the tests increase, the standard deviations also increase. This indicates variability enhancement among the participants in both groups.

The significance of the differences between each pair of tests in the individual and collaborative output groups is illustrated in Table 4:

Table 4. *Independent Samples t Tests for the Developmental Trend of Inversion Acquisition*

Pairs	IO			Gain	CO			Gain
	df	t	Sig.		df	t	Sig.	
1 Pr-T1	29	.372	.712	-0.03	29	1.161	.255	0.13
2 T1-T2	29	2.088*	.046	0.47	29	1.819	.079	0.43
3 T2-T3	29	2.845**	.008	0.30	29	1.361	.184	-0.20
4 T3-IP	29	.092	.928	0.03	29	3.885**	.001	1.80
5 IP-DP	29	1.055	.300	0.50	29	3.371**	.002	2.66

\*significant at  $p < .05$   
 \*\*significant at  $p < .01$

As Table 4 shows, in the individual output group, a hardly significant improvement in pair 2 ( $p=.046$ ) and a quite considerable improvement in pair 3 ( $p=.008$ ) are observed. For the other pairs, the improvements were greatly nonsignificant. In the collaborative output group, pairs 1, 2, and 3 show nonsignificant improvements ( $p > 0.05$ ), and in pairs 4 and 5, the  $p$  values are considerably significant:  $p_4 = .001$ ,  $p_5 = .002$ , respectively.

Figure 2 below graphically presents the trend of development of the participants in both groups across the stated time intervals:

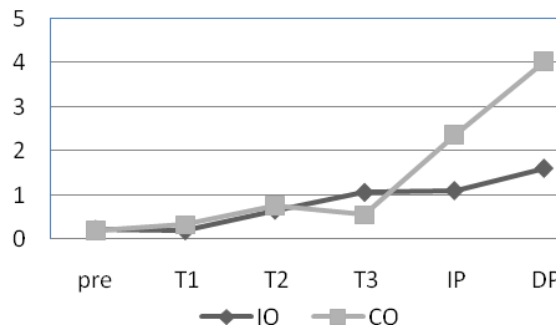


Figure 2. Development Trend of Inversion Acquisition in IO and CO

As shown in Figure 2, the participants in the CO group are shown to have almost the same pattern of development as their counterpart IO group up to T3,

where the line leaps upwards and soon overtakes the line of IO group to reach its peak performance in DP. A gradual slow rise is observed in IO group. Little constant fluctuations in performance are seen all throughout the study from the pretest to the DP. T3 in the present study seems to be a turning point for both groups because the performances of the participants fall apart from this point. Interpretation of the results will appear in Discussion section.

## 7. Discussion

This study set out to investigate the differential effects of individual output and collaborative output on L2 learners' acquisition of English inversion structures. The pattern of development was also quantitatively investigated in the groups.

Regarding the first research question, the results revealed the superiority of the collaborative output task over the individual output task in the acquisition of the inversion structures. The results indicated that the output-based tasks could positively affect L2 learning when they had a specific linguistic focus. The relationship between the participants' pretest and posttest scores revealed that many participants improved their production of the L2 forms. The participants' outperformance in the collaborative output group might be due to the reception of immediate feedback from their peers on their linguistic choices. The results are in favor of Swain's (2000) collaborative dialog in which speakers are engaged in problem solving and knowledge building. The study supports the claim that the collaborative dialog is a useful unit of analysis to explore the process and product of L2 learning, which goes "beyond output" (Swain, 2000).

The results also indicate that dictogloss, when done collaboratively, could lead L2 learners to improve their knowledge on English inversion structures. The justification for this main effect could be the presence of different consciousness-raising techniques in a dictogloss task. Dictogloss prepares opportunities for learners to negotiate form and meaning simultaneously. The findings from the present study also lend support to Watanabe and Swain's (2007) claim that when involved in the collaborative dialog, the learners are more likely to attain higher posttest scores regardless of the difference in their proficiency level. The results are also in line with Reinders' (2009) belief that individuals' output treatment is the most cognitively demanding task type in that the participants do not get help from a partner; therefore, task implementation in this case requires a greater amount of processing. As the results show the superiority of the collaborative output task, the study played its part in extending our understanding of how collaboration in doing language activities can be conducive in L2 instruction.

The second research question concerned the trend of development of the study groups over the specified time. This trend was evaluated from the pretest which was the onset of the treatment up to the end of the treatment upon the posttest.

The DP was also included as part of the trend to measure the retention of the treatment effect over time.

One can clearly observe multiple fluctuations in the performance of the participants in the CO group throughout the treatment. The fluctuating behavior observed in this group shows that language learning, like any other type of learning, is not always a linear process. Learners may sometimes go through an early stage of development characterized by the use of an L2-like feature. If this feature resembles an L1 feature, they replace it with a developmental L2 feature before they finally return to the correct L2 feature (Ellis, 1994). Segalowitz (2003) relates this phenomenon to the concept of automaticity. He hypothesizes that when the communicative situation is too demanding (as in the case of output in this study), control processes responsible for the learner selecting correct forms are not functioning. It may even be possible that new learning can lead to restructuring of existing linguistic knowledge so that some controlled process is no longer operative. When this happens, “background automatic processes that normally coordinate with controlled processes by detecting error potential situations now determine behavior alone” (p. 397), and the student makes the very error which she or he had appeared to have overcome. Therefore, a learner’s mastery of a particular language item is unstable, appearing to increase and decrease at different times during the learning process.

The collaborative output task paid off after T3 as the trend line leaps upward. It seems that interlanguage finally gets stabilized after multiple fluctuations in the collaborative output group. In the individual output group, the improvement was slow and constant without much fluctuations or nonlinear behavior. It can be assumed that the availability of the peer feedback in the case of the CO group enhanced the speed of the learners’ development and stabilization of their interlanguage. It is hypothesized that the trend line will continue to grow sharply by the CO and slowly by the IO group.

The final point is that, in some cases, learning gains by both groups were low, which might be attributed to the low proficiency level of the participants, lack of readiness for the acquisition of the L2 forms (Pienemann, 1989), or unfamiliarity of the participants with the task. It seems that word order is not a salient feature for Iranian EFL learners. This might be due to the structure of their L1. Persian is a language with a fairly free word order. A variety of orders may be permitted for a single sentence. This habit of taking the word order as a trivial matter may have been transferred to English learning by these EFL learners.

## **8. Conclusion**

The present study confirms the effectiveness of collaboration as a mediator of L2 learning. The findings, however, should be interpreted with caution because factors other than the ones investigated could have contributed to the outcomes.

Possible reasons for caution in applying the findings to other populations include potential differences in motivation, reasons for learning, and assessment parameters. Another caution for the interpretation of the results of this study is the practice effect that may have affected the performances of the participants in the posttests. The participants were administered similar developmental and main tests throughout the study. Therefore, a follow-up study could have been conducted to examine whether gain scores in the posttests could be attributed to practice effects or not.

The L2 forms could be another important factor. If future research, indeed, demonstrates that only some forms are amenable to form-focused instruction in general and output-based instruction in particular, then instruction employing this type of technique should selectively focus on certain L2 forms. Further research should be carried out to compare the effects of collaborative output tasks in the acquisition of different features of the language. Furthermore, it is suggested that learners' behavior throughout the process of task implementation be more carefully monitored and recorded, and the related language-related episodes (LREs) be analyzed in order to investigate what aspects of language the EFL learners are likely to notice.

DeKeyser (2005) contends that the level of difficulty of a form and the ease with which it is learnt are determined by the transparency of form-meaning relationships. The other factor is redundancy. Redundant forms are probably difficult to learn because the meaning can be conveyed simply by another form; therefore, they do not have contributions to the meaning. Probably, future studies in focus-on-form to compare the level of acquisition of different forms are welcome.

Finally, other collaborative output-based tasks can be devised to see the effects on the acquisition of form. Menicoll and Lee (2011) argue that the proficiency level of L2 learners should be taken into consideration when designing consciousness-raising tasks. Whereas higher proficiency level learners benefit from cognitively demanding tasks like dictogloss, more concrete tasks like text-repair are probably better options for lower-proficiency level learners. Therefore, the relative effectiveness of different individually and collaboratively performed tasks on the acquisition of grammatical forms by EFL learners at different proficiency levels can also enrich the literature on task-based language learning and teaching.

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