

A comparative study on the effects of peer influence on willingness to communicate in speaking activities in online and face-to-face EFL lessons

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Highlights

- This study investigated EFL learners' willingness to communicate with the same partners and different partners in speaking activities in pairs or small groups in both face-to-face and online education.
- The study also focused on the similarities or differences in learners' views regarding the same and different partners according to different learning environments (face-to-face and online).
- Based on the results, two main themes and several subthemes were found and compared in accordance with the groups.

Abstract

The purpose of the study is to investigate whether English as a foreign language (EFL) learners are more willing to communicate and study with the same partners or different partners in speaking activities in pairs or small groups and to determine whether there are similarities or differences in learners' views regarding the same and different partners according to different learning environments (face-to-face and online). A qualitative research design was adopted in the study. The participants were EFL learners at the School of Foreign Languages (SFL) of a state university in Izmir, Turkey. The participants were divided into two groups. The first group (FF) included 20 students who took face-to-face education and the second group (OL) consisted of 20 students who took online education. The qualitative data were collected from both groups by means of a structured written interview form. The results revealed two main themes (1-Feelings, 2- English language production process) and ten sub-themes (1a- positive feelings, 1b- negative feelings, 1c- both positive and negative feelings, 2a- developing intimacy, 2b- collaboration and ease of communication, 2c- insufficiency of English language production, 2d-increase of knowledge, 2e-use of speaking skills, 2f- insufficiency of socialization and interaction, 2g-challenges of online education). The study compares both groups with respect to the above themes and subthemes and discusses implications for the teaching of English.

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Keywords: English as a foreign language, Willingness to communicate, Peer influence, Same partners, Different partners.

1. Introduction

In foreign language contexts, learners are usually deprived of the 'access to native speaker models for their linguistic information and to actual samples from everyday social interaction' (García Mayo & Pica, 2000, p. 273). Besides, learners commonly do not have many opportunities for target language production inside or outside of the classroom (Sato, 2013). By considering these cases, 'the importance of language classes in which learners could possibly engage in meaningful interaction by receiving the necessary input and producing spontaneous speech' (Sato & Ballinger, 2016, p.8) comes into prominence. Similarly, Bowles

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and Adams (2015) observe that a foreign language classroom is usually the only opportunity for language learners to be exposed to and use the target language. Therefore, peer interaction activities are suggested as ecological and effective tools as they provide opportunities for each learner to speak and participate, unlike teacher-centered activities (Sato & Ballinger, 2016).

In relation with this, the concept of Willingness to Communicate (WTC) has attracted much attention in the field of language teaching. Despite numerous studies conducted in various countries worldwide, there remains a lack of research conducted on L2 WTC in the Turkish EFL context. Although peer interaction has been investigated since the early 1980s, it still draws less attention by comparison with other sorts of interaction (Sato & Ballinger, 2016). Moreover, there are fewer studies conducted on peer interaction in foreign language classrooms than in second language classrooms (Garcia Mayo & Azkarai, 2016). Additionally, to the researchers' knowledge, previous studies have not dealt with the impact of studying with the same or different partners on learners' WTC levels and language production in communicative activities in English as a foreign language (EFL) classes. It is an issue Cao and Philip (2006) also suggested for further studies by stating:

... However, it was not possible to gauge the degree to which WTC actually differed according to partnership or participation of interlocutors as, for each pair or group session, participants were randomly partnered; sometimes an individual had the same or different partners. This is an area of further investigation for future research. (p. 488).

Philp et al. (2014) also pointed out limited examination of relationships between the partners in the literature as: "... the potential of peer interaction for learning is mediated by setting, participants, and tasks but also by the relationships between participants and their prior experiences together. This is reflected throughout the research on peer interaction and L2 learning, but (as yet) rarely intentionally examined." (p. 201).

In order to address the gaps and the aforementioned problems regarding WTC and peer interaction in the EFL context, the present study seeks to reveal the participants' willingness or unwillingness toward studying with the same and different partners during peer interactions in speaking activities in pairs or small groups. Another purpose of the study is to determine whether there are similarities or differences in learners' views regarding the same and different partners according to different learning environments (face-to-face and online). Thereby, this study aims to make contributions to the research of WTC in English and peer interaction in Turkish EFL context and provide beneficial recommendations for language teachers in the sense of developing positive and effective grouping strategies in various classroom contexts. As a result, speaking tasks may be utilized more productively in accordance with the results of the current study in EFL learning environments.

2. Literature

2.1. *Willingness to Communicate*

Investigations into willingness or unwillingness to communicate were primarily carried out in native or first language (L1) rather than second or foreign languages (L2/FL). Scholars such as Burgoon (1976), McCroskey and Baer (1985), McCroskey and Richmond (1982, 1987), and MacIntyre (1994) perceived the concept of WTC as a trait-like predisposition which remains consistent across diverse communication situations regardless of the passage of time or the presence of different conversational partners. During the 1990s, there was a growing interest among scholars in exploring the concept of WTC, particularly within the context of L2 acquisition. Researchers began to question whether the factors influencing WTC in one's L1 are comparable to those in the L2 setting. To shed light on this matter, MacIntyre et al. (1998) argued that L2 WTC is not simply a direct reflection of L1 WTC. In comparison to the L1 context, the L2 context involves more intricate variables, such as varying levels of language proficiency, communicative competence, political and social considerations, which necessitate careful examination.

In contrast to the previous researchers (Burgoon, 1976; MacIntyre, 1994; McCroskey & Baer, 1985; McCroskey & Richmond, 1982, 1987) who viewed WTC as a trait related to personality, MacIntyre and his colleagues (1998) considered WTC as a variable influenced by specific situations and subject to both

temporary and lasting effects. MacIntyre et al. (1998) defined WTC as “a readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using a L2.” (p. 547) and they regarded it as the primary and paramount objective of language education because linguistic or communicative competence alone cannot ensure learners’ genuine communication in L2. While some language learners possess proficiency in accuracy, they may still avoid using L2 and participating in communicative activities. On the other hand, there are individuals who demonstrate a greater willingness to speak in every possible situation despite having limited linguistic knowledge. Furthermore, these learners’ communicative behaviors can vary depending on different circumstances and evolve over time. Therefore, it is evident that WTC in the L2 context is not only a complex phenomenon to comprehend but also a crucial subject deserving investigation as it directly influences the language learning process and the frequency of communication. Within this context, in recent years, there has been an increasing interest in WTC in L2 and various variables affecting learners’ WTC levels have been propounded. In the literature, some of those variables (direct precursors of WTC) were found to be perceived competence (MacIntyre & Charos, 1996; Öz, Demirezen & Pourfeiz, 2015), self-confidence (Bektaş Çetinkaya, 2005; Cao & Philip, 2006; Cao, 2011; Lee, 2019; Lee & Lee, 2020), state communication self-confidence (MacIntyre et al., 1998), communication confidence (Khajavy et al., 2016; Yashima, 2002; Yashima, Zenuk-Nishide, & Shimizu, 2004), international posture (Yashima, 2002; Yashima, Zenuk-Nishide, & Shimizu, 2004), anxiety (Lee, 2019; Lee & Lee, 2020; MacIntyre & Charos, 1996; Savaşçı, 2014), communication apprehension (Öz, Demirezen & Pourfeiz, 2015), context (Başöz & Erten, 2018; Bergil, 2016; MacIntyre & Charos, 1996; Kang, 2005; Lee & Lee, 2020), personality (Cao, 2011), topic (Cao, 2011; Cao & Philip, 2006; Kang, 2005), task (Cao, 2011), (familiarity with) interlocutors, (Cao, 2011; Cao & Philip, 2006; Kang, 2005; Lee, 2019), teacher (Cao, 2011; Savaşçı, 2014), group size (Cao, 2011; Cao & Philip, 2006), motivation (Lee & Lee, 2020; MacIntyre, Baker, Clément & Donovan, 2003), learners’ past intensive language learning experiences (MacIntyre, Baker, Clément & Donovan, 2003), cultural background (Cao & Philip, 2006), ways of communication (Cao & Philip, 2006), classroom environment (Khajavy et al., 2016), attitudes toward the international community (Bektaş Çetinkaya, 2005), and ideal L2 self (Bursalı & Öz, 2017). As can be seen above, a variety of variables, from individual differences to culture, have been found to affect learners’ WTC levels.

2.2. Interaction Hypothesis

The Interaction Hypothesis (IH) in the field of SLA has been evolving for about 30 years and conversational interactions are viewed as the most important facet of language acquisition (Cook, 2008). IH, in which interaction and input are seen as indispensable elements of language acquisition, was first proposed by Long (1981). As Ellis (1991) observed, the origins of IH lie in Krashen’s (1977, 1980), and Hatch’s (1978) studies or ideas, the first of which prioritizes comprehensible input for SLA, and the second lays stress on interactions which lead to grammar improvement in L2 using a discourse analysis. In his early formula, Long (1981) built his study basically on the conversations between native speakers (NS) and non-native speakers (NNS) and on the notion that native speakers usually modify their speech during their talk with non-native speakers. During these NS-NNS interactions, two conspicuous aspects, input and interaction, were elaborated. Long (1981) provided a lucid definition of the terms as follows: “*Input* refers to the linguistic forms used; by *interaction* is meant the functions served by those forms, such as expansion, repetition, and clarification.” (p. 259). Most importantly in this study, it was stated that partaking in a dialogue with native speakers, which is enabled via modified interaction, is a necessary and sufficient condition for a successful second language acquisition.

As Ellis (2008) stated, among abundant researchers who perceive comprehensible input as a major causative factor in second language acquisition, the most influential theorists are Krashen (1981, 1985, 1989) and Long (1981, 1983, 1989). Despite the fact that Krashen’s input hypothesis and Long’s interaction hypothesis find a common ground in terms of the essential role of comprehensible input for SLA, they differ substantially in that how input could be made comprehensible. Krashen asserted that input becomes comprehensible due to simplification and by means of contextual and extralinguistic clues, while Long highlighted the significance of modified interaction occurring in negotiating meaning in the course of a

conversational problem. According to Long, interactive input is more important than non-interactive input. Long (1989) also extended his ideas about comprehensible input. In his early studies, he supported the idea that comprehensible input is necessary and sufficient for L2 acquisition; however, afterwards he acknowledged that it may not be sufficient although it is necessary for SLA (1989). In his latter article (1996), he stated that: “Although necessary for L1 or L2 acquisition, however, there is abundant evidence that comprehensible input alone is insufficient, particularly with adults and if nativelike proficiency is the goal.” (p. 423). His second extension of the hypothesis has occurred upon recognizing Swain’s (1985) Output Hypothesis, which proposes that comprehensible input is necessary but not sufficient alone for L2 acquisition so output or language use/production is needed. With the help of output, learners can see the limits of their linguistic abilities, what they can and can not do and what they know and do not know; moreover, they can try new language structures and reflect on their own or other people’s language productions. Gass and Mackey (2007) posited that the current formulation of IH contains some features of Krashen’s (1985) Input Hypothesis and Swain’s (1985, 1995, 2005) Output Hypothesis. In their words, “the interaction approach attempts to account for learning through the learner’s exposure to language, production of language, and feedback on that production.” (2007, p. 181). They summarized the key points of IH as follows: “The central tenet of the approach is that interaction facilitates the process of acquiring a second language, as it provides learners with opportunities to receive modified input, to receive feedback, both explicitly and implicitly, which in turn may draw learners’ attention to problematic aspects of their interlanguage and push them to produce modified output.” (Gass & Mackey, 2007, p.199).

2.2.1. Peer Interaction

Simply, interaction refers to ‘the conversations that learners participate in’ (Gass & Mackey, 2007, p.183), and peer interaction is ‘any communicative activity carried out between learners, where there is minimal or no participation from the teacher. This can include cooperative and collaborative learning, peer tutoring, and other forms of help from peers’ (Philp et al., 2014, p.3). Peer interaction (or learner-learner interaction) is different from learner-teacher or learner-native speaker interaction (Sato & Ballinger, 2016), and constitutes the context where language learners are together in order to learn in a classroom environment (Philp et al., 2014). This context is resembled to a kaleidoscope in the sense that “it changes with the shifting combinations of those involved, how they relate to one another, the activity in which they are engaged, their purposes and means, and so on.” (Philp et al., 2014, p.1). Peer talk is also described by Blum-Kulka and Snow (2004, p. 291) as having ‘collaborative, multiparty, symmetrical participation structure’. It is collaborative because participants work together towards a common goal. Additionally, it is multiparty in that at least two or more participants are involved. Last of all, it is symmetrical as all learners are equal in interaction with regard to participant contributions (Philp, 2016). In addition to the wider framework of the classroom which is a factor affecting peer interaction, the nature of peer interaction as a context for learning is also shaped by various dimensions such as:

- the central emphasis of language use in the interaction (e.g., experimental, corrective, or fluency based);
- the participants within the group (e.g., their social relations, age, experience, and proficiency);
- the medium and mode of instruction (whether oral or written, face-to-face or online);
- the task (purpose, specification, and content) (Philp et al. 2014, p.11).

Peer interaction provides learners with opportunities to practice and research the target language jointly. Besides, thanks to pair work, talking time for each learner increases dramatically, learners are promoted to become more independent due to less intervention by teachers, cooperation among learners is cultivated, and a relaxed and friendly learning environment is created. It is also mentioned that by working together rather than on their own, learners can share the responsibility of the task or activity (Harmer, 2007). Being different from teacher and learner interaction, peer interaction gives learners chances for various kinds of practice and language use. While using the language in interaction, learners try out how to express meaning; in turn, their language abilities and understanding improve. In a collaborative mood, they can revise or reformulate language forms as a result of each other’s feedback. In this way, they contribute to each other’s learning. From explicit language rules, they move on to a trial-and-error process. By working together, they

resolve linguistic problems they face during their communication. That is to say, learner-learner interaction provides them with a setting in which they test language structures, realize their linguistic knowledge limits during their struggles, notice language forms and become aware of gaps in their language knowledge. Their motivation to learn can also increase owing to peer interaction. In peer interaction, learners have more symmetrical roles than in teacher-learner interaction and they may discover language use with more autonomy and less anxiety of correction without teachers' presence (Philp et al. 2014). Furthermore, peer interaction provides "a context facilitative of learning in which learners experience greater levels of comfort" (Sato & Ballinger, 2016, p. 6). This comfort positively impacts learners' L2 processing as it helps them notice and point out errors in their partners' speech and encourage them to reformulate their own errors when given feedback. Since learners feel more comfortable with their partners, they can produce language more and have more chances to practise language (Sato & Ballinger, 2016). Apparently, peer interaction is conducive to language learning process.

The importance and benefits of peer interaction were displayed in studies based on sociocultural theory (Aksoy-Pekacar & Erten, 2021; Donato, 1994; Ohta, 2001; Storch, 2002; Swain, 2000; Swain, 2006; Swain & Lapkin, 1998; Wells, 1989). In addition, those based on interaction hypothesis were conducted by Gass and Varonis (1989), Long (1996), Long and Porter (1985), McDonough (2004), Sato (2013) and Varonis and Gass (1985) and those based on output hypothesis were conducted by Swain (1985, 1995, 2005). Besides, considering the context, several prominent studies which included peer interaction were conducted in face-to-face (Gass & Varonis, 1989; Long & Porter, 1985; McDonough, 2004; Sato, 2013; Varonis & Gass, 1985) and online contexts (Cancino & Avila, 2021; Cherney, Fetherston & Johnsen, 2018; Means et al., 2010; Okyar, 2022). In general, the results of these studies demonstrated that learners' dialogues during peer interaction were found to be beneficial for language learners to co-construct meaning together (Aksoy-Pekacar & Erten, 2021); peer scaffolding or collective scaffolding promoted individuals' linguistic development (Donato, 1994); peers provided assistance to their partners even if they were not proficient in the target language (Ohta, 2001); learners having *collaborative* and *expert/novice* relationships benefitted from the tasks in terms of co-constructing and internalizing the language knowledge and these patterns were found to be more conducive to L2 learning (Storch, 2002); collaborative dialogue enabled learners to regulate both their partners' and their own language use and reflect on them (Swain, 2000); collaborative dialogues between peers in the task led to vocabulary and grammar development (Swain & Lapkin, 1998); positive relations were found between conversational interaction and L2 acquisition (Gass & Varonis, 1989); during their peer interactions, learners provided each other with more correction and negotiation for meaning opportunities in contrast with teacher-centered or whole-class contexts (Long & Porter, 1985); learners found peer interactions useful for improving speaking skills and they had positive attitudes towards receiving feedback from their peers (Sato, 2013); and insufficient levels of peer interactions and lack of peer rapport affected the learners' collaborative actions and social presence negatively (Cancino & Avila, 2021). Therefore, it can be remarked that peer interaction is considered as a significant issue worth investigating since it seems to affect the success of language learning.

3. Methodology

3.1. The Purpose of the Study

The present study aims to examine EFL learners' experiences regarding WTC in English in speaking activities, especially in terms of the cases in which they are paired or grouped with the same partners they choose and randomly chosen different partners in face-to-face and online education. The following research questions are investigated:

- a) How do EFL learners compare in face-to-face and online education regarding their reflections on studying with the same partners?
- b) How do EFL learners compare in face-to-face and online education regarding their reflections on studying with different partners?

3.2. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to investigate learners' experiences in terms of their WTC in English in communicative activities in pairs or small groups. Specifically, the study adopted the Thematic Analysis method to analyze the data. The study aimed to find out whether learners are more willing to communicate with the same partners or different partners in speaking activities in face-to-face and online lessons. Besides, it aimed to reveal whether there are similarities or differences in learners' views on the same topic between the learners who took face-to-face lessons and those who took online lessons.

3.3. Setting and Participants

The present study was conducted at the School of Foreign Languages (SFL) of Izmir Institute of Technology (IZTECH), a state university in Izmir, Turkey. The university offers undergraduate and graduate education in the areas of Science, Engineering and Architecture. IZTECH SFL provides English language education for both undergraduate and graduate students. The students at the SFL receive intensive English language education for an academic year in order to meet the academic needs of their respective departments where the medium of the instruction is completely English. At the beginning of the academic year, the students at the SFL have to take an English proficiency exam. Students whose level is B1 or higher, according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), are exempt from attending the Preparatory School and can begin their education in their departments. Those who are not at a B1+ level are placed into levels (as Level 1, Level 2 and Level 3) in accordance with the scores they receive from the proficiency exam and are provided with English language education for one academic year. The SFL offers lessons named as Integrated Skills (IS), where the skills of reading, listening, writing, and speaking are taught together rather than separately. The academic year at the SFL is divided into two terms: Fall and Spring, each lasting approximately 15 or 16 weeks. In the Fall term, Level 1 students study A2 (elementary) and A2+ (pre-intermediate) coursebooks, while in the Spring term, they focus on B1 and B1+ coursebooks. The participants in the present study were at the stage of completing A2+ (pre-intermediate) coursebook at the time the data were collected.

There were two groups of participants in the present study. Their native language was Turkish and they were learning English as a foreign language at the SFL. All the participants were Level 1 (elementary + pre-intermediate) students. They were expected to major in programs such as chemical engineering, civil engineering, environmental engineering, chemistry, city and regional planning, photonics, architecture, molecular biology and genetics and so forth. The first group of participants included 20 students, half of whom were female and the other half of whom were male. Their ages ranged from 18 to 22. The students took 24 hours of face-to-face lessons a week in the Fall term of the 2019-2020 academic year (hereafter referred to as the FF group). They all were in the same class in which one of the researchers was teaching. The second group of participants also consisted of 20 students, half of whom were female and the other half of whom were male. Their ages ranged from 18 to 23. They took 24 hours of synchronous online lessons a week via Microsoft Teams in the Fall term of the 2020-2021 academic year, in which the SFL adopted an online education model due to the coronavirus pandemic (hereafter referred to as the OL group). They were also in the same class in which one of the researchers was teaching.

3.4. Instrument and Data Collection Procedures

The data were collected via a structured interview form including four questions (see Appendix A). The main purpose of administering an interview was to obtain a deeper understanding of participants' reflections on studying with the same and different partners in communicative activities throughout the term. The written interviews were called as structured because 'wording and order of the questions are predetermined' (Merriam, 2009, p.89). The questions in the interview form were prepared by the researcher.

In order to collect data regarding students' views on studying with the same or different peers, the participants in the FF group were asked to self-select their partners with whom they would do communicative activities every other week. The partners that were selected were usually the students who were seated nearby. Throughout the whole semester, students did communicative activities with the same

partners in pairs or small groups for one week and were randomly assigned to pairs or small groups in such a way that they would study with different partners in each activity for the following week. The pairing system continued in the same manner until the end of the Fall term. The communicative activities included a wide range of grammar structures and topics in accordance with the objectives of the lessons and respective unit throughout the semester. The activities consisted of information gap activities, jigsaw readings, card games, class mingle activities such as *find someone who...*, board games, discussion activities, role-plays and simple sentence completion or finding the other half of the sentence type of activities. The students performed at least five communicative activities with their partners per week. Towards the end of the Fall term in the 2019-2020 academic year, the structured written interview form was administered to the students. Although 30 students gave consent to participate in the study, only 21 of them, who were present in class on the day when interview forms were distributed, could fill in the form. One form was excluded from the data analysis because it contained unclear statements. The interview questions were written in both Turkish and English. The students completed the form in nearly 15 minutes.

Similar to the FF group, the participants in the OL group were also allowed to self-select their partners with whom they would do communicative activities every other week throughout the term. At the beginning of the term, a google sheet in an excel format was prepared and sent to the students to write the names of whom they would like to do communicative activities with, in pairs and groups. Those partners were called as the same partners. Before the study, they had chances to get to know each other during speaking activities for a couple of weeks. Throughout the whole semester, the students did communicative activities with the same partners in pairs or small groups for one week and they were randomly assigned to pairs or small groups in such a way that they would study with different partners in each activity for the following week. This pairing system continued in this way until the end of the Fall term. The students in this group performed similar communicative activities to those in the FF group. The students performed at least five communicative activities with their partners per week. Towards the end of the Fall term in the 2020-2021 academic year, the same structured written interview form written in both Turkish and English was sent to the students as a word document on the thread of Microsoft Teams. After completing the form, the students returned it to the researcher via e-mail. Although 24 students gave consent to participate in the study and filled in the interview form, four forms were excluded due to unclear statements. The students completed the form in nearly 15 minutes in one of the synchronous online lessons.

3.5. Data Analysis

To analyze the data, Braun and Clarke's (2012) Thematic Analysis (TA) method and its six-phase approach was adopted. Those phases were: "1) Familiarizing yourself with the data, 2) Generating initial codes, 3) Searching for themes, 4) Reviewing potential themes, 5) Defining and naming themes, and 6) Producing the report" (pp. 60-69). In the first phase, the researcher read the textual data repeatedly in order to familiarize herself with them. Notes were taken on the data regarding how the participants make sense of their experiences, what assumptions they make in interpreting their experiences, and what kind of world is revealed through their accounts (Braun & Clarke, 2012). In the second phase, in order to produce initial codes, the responses were read again and potentially relevant sections such as phrases or sentences in the texts were highlighted and coded on hard copy data. Coding was accomplished at both semantic and latent level of meanings. Thus, they consisted of both descriptive (close to participants' language use) and interpretative (beyond participants' meanings) ones. Some of the codes were even composed of 'in vivo coding', which means 'utilizing the participant's own language as a symbol system for qualitative data analysis' (Saldana & Omasta, 2018, p.182). The third phase included theme searching, which involved grouping the codes according to their similarities or shared features. By reviewing those groups of codes, sub-themes and themes took shape. Phase four included a review of the potential themes. By checking the themes on whether they represented the data effectively or not, a quality check was done. In this process, some codes were relocated under other sub-themes. After that, another reading was performed to see whether the sub-themes and themes meaningfully encapsulate the whole data set in relation to the research question of the study. Phase five contained defining and naming themes. In this phase, sub-themes and

themes were summarized with extracts to be able to express what was specific to them. In the last phase, a report of the analysis was presented.

To ensure reliability, ‘intercoder agreement (cross-checking)’ (Creswell, 2009, p. 191) technique was utilized. In every step of the coding process, an expert in the field of English Language Teaching was consulted. All data set were read, reviewed and codes, sub-themes and themes were cross-checked by an expert who provided the researcher with deep and objective insights into the data analysis. This way, investigator triangulation was also ensured (Merriam, 2009).

4. Results

In the light of the first research question, which explored EFL learners’ reflections on studying with the same partners in both face-to-face and online education, two major themes and several sub-themes emerged. Regarding the learners in the FF group, the themes and subthemes (in parenthesis) are as follows: 1) *Feelings (positive feelings, negative feelings, and both positive and negative feelings)*; 2) *English language production process (developing intimacy, collaboration and ease of communication, and insufficiency of English language production)*. For the learners in the OL group, the themes and subthemes were 1) *Feelings (positive feelings, and both positive and negative feelings)*; 2) *English language production process (developing intimacy, collaboration and ease of communication, insufficiency of English language production, and challenges of online education)*. As suggested by Saldana and Omasta (2018) and Creswell (2012), the qualitative data obtained from both groups were quantitized and numeric representations of the qualitative results were depicted in tables with frequencies and percentages. The following table shows a comparison of the FF and OL groups regarding their reflections on working with the same partners.

Table 1.

Comparison of FF and OL groups: the same partners

Themes			The number of learners in face-to-face group f (%) (20 learners)	The number of learners in online group f (%) (20 learners)	The number of learners in face-to-face and online group f (%) (40 learners)
Feelings	With the same partners	Positive	14 (70%)	18 (90%)	32 (80%)
		Negative	5 (25%)	0 (0%)	5 (12.5%)
		Both positive and negative	1 (5%)	2 (10%)	3 (7.5%)
English language production process	With the same partners	More production	15 (75%)	18 (90%)	33 (82.5%)
		Less production	5 (25%)	2 (10%)	7 (17.5%)

The table shows that whereas 70 % of the students in the FF group stated that they had positive feelings towards studying with the same partners in communicative activities (S5: “I feel relaxed because I spend more time with him/her and I know him/her well...”), this rate was 90% for the students in the OL group (S4: “I feel more relaxed when I study with the same partners... As we have got used to each other, I do not feel nervous and do not hesitate to say my ideas.”). A minority of students (25%) in the FF group asserted that they felt negative about studying with the same partners (S13: “I do not feel good with the same people. It is better to talk to different people.” / S16: “Sometimes it can be boring, so I decide to practice with another person.”). Only one student in the FF group (S17: “I can feel relaxed and express myself better with the same partners in the long term, but I also sense that this case disrupts the lesson as we can get off the point.”) and two students in the OL group (S1: “I felt bored and tired at first because it was like repeating the same topics over and over. However, afterwards I started to feel amused...it can be more relaxing to study with the same people.”) remarked both positive and negative feelings about studying with the same partners.

The *English language production process* theme consisted of three sub-themes in the FF group as: a) developing intimacy, b) collaboration and ease of communication and c) insufficiency of English language production and four sub-themes in the OL group as: a) developing intimacy, b) collaboration and ease of communication, c) insufficiency of English language production and d) challenges of online education. They all appear to have effects on learners' language production. Learners stated they produced language more or less according to the following reasons in their statements. Compared to the students in the FF group (75%), more students (90%) in the OL group stated that they produced more English language with the same partners. Regarding the subtheme (a), students stated that they give importance to having sincere and intimate relationships with their partners during their performances in communicative activities (S10-FF: "When we study with the same partners continuously, we feel close and knowledge sharing increases."/ S4-OL: "We exchange more information because we study together a lot, know each other better and get on well. As we are used to each other, we can talk to each other easily."). As for (b), while studying with the same partners the learners are used to, they stated that they are open to collaboration and find it easy to talk to their partners and express themselves better (S19-FF: "I talk more because I can explain myself more easily with the same partners than different partners."/ S7-OL: "We correct our mistakes and teach the correct ones. We create content together. While forming sentences, we try to complete each other's sentences. In our sentences, we help each other with correct tense use and word order. ..."). The subtheme (c) covers the points which hinder language production. Only five students in the FF group and one student in the OL group thought that studying with the same partners was not fruitful for their language skills. (S2-FF: "When we talk to the same partners, we start to talk in Turkish after a while. We talk less in English. We get off the topic of the task and continue to talk about other things." / S9-OL: "I think we share less because there is not much difference in our levels of English. This situation does not contribute to my improvement of English. As time passes, we know more things about each other. Sometimes we can have similar speaking tasks in terms of the topics especially in the speaking tasks in our course book. Then we cut the conversations short as we already know the answers about each other. Since we do not have a lot of difference in our proficiency levels, it is not a very efficient information exchange for me."). As for the subtheme, *challenges of online education*, one (out of 20) student asserted that his language production was low due to online education. This sub-theme was mainly about the difficulties regarding online education while studying with the same partners (S11-OL: "...Even if we study with the same people, we cannot get sincere enough and this is not fruitful for me. Because online education is an unusual situation, we need some time to get used to it. I do not know how long it will continue but I think we are still in the adaptation phase.").

The second research question was related to the reflections of EFL learners on studying with different partners in both face-to-face and online education. Two major themes and several sub-themes emerged. Regarding the learners in the FF group, the themes and subthemes (in parenthesis) are as follows: 1) *Feelings (positive feelings, negative feelings, and both positive and negative feelings)*; 2) *English language production process (increase of knowledge, use of speaking skills and insufficiency of socialization and interaction)*. For the learners in the OL group, the themes and subthemes were 1) *Feelings (positive feelings, negative feelings, and both positive and negative feelings)*; 2) *English language production process (increase of knowledge, use of speaking skills, insufficiency of English language production and challenges of online education)*. The following table shows a comparison of the FF and OL groups regarding their reflections on working with different partners.

Table 2.

Comparison of FF and OL groups: different partners

Themes			The number of learners in face-to-face group f (%) (20 learners)	The number of learners in online group f (%) (20 learners)	The number of learners in face-to-face and online group f (%) (40 learners)
Feelings	With different partners	Positive	9 (45%)	4 (20%)	13 (32.5%)
		Negative	7 (35%)	10 (50%)	17 (42.5%)
		Both positive and negative	4 (20%)	6 (30%)	10 (25%)
English language production process	With different partners	More production	8 (40%)	3 (15%)	11 (27.5%)
		Less production	12 (60%)	16 (80%)	28 (70%)
		Both (sometimes more, sometimes less)	0 (0%)	1 (5%)	1 (2.5%)

According to the table, while 45 % of the students in the FF group had positive feelings towards studying with different partners (S1: “It excites me because I learn new things about someone else.”), only 20 % of the students in the OL group expressed positive feelings (S18: “There is no reason which leads me to feel nervous when I meet new partners. I usually feel relaxed and calm.”). More students (50%) in the OL group expressed negative feelings than those (35%) in the FF group (S9-FF: “I feel shy, uncomfortable and nervous since that’s not the same person.” / S5-OL: “During the speaking activities with different people, I feel extremely nervous because of forming wrong sentences. Also, I cannot do the tasks willingly. There were times when I hesitated to ask questions.”). Moreover, some students (n=4, 20% in FF, n=6, 30% in OL) stated both positive and negative feelings in both groups (S14-FF: “Although I feel nervous with different people, I have fun. Being nervous encourages me to speak English better. Sometimes I have hesitations such as what if different partners find my ideas weird or silly.” / S6-OL: “When I do the speaking tasks with different partners, I feel nervous at first. Then I feel relaxed and I try to focus on the sentences I am going to form. While my partner is talking, I listen to him/her carefully and take notes of the words I do not know in his/her sentences. Learning new words makes my sentence formation easier. As my vocab knowledge increases, I feel better and self-confident.”).

Regarding the *English language production process* theme, more students (80%) in the OL group stated that they produced less English language with different partners than those in the FF group (60%). This theme consisted of three sub-themes in the FF group as: a) increase of knowledge, b) use of speaking skills and c) insufficiency of socialization and interaction and four sub-themes in the OL group as: a) increase of knowledge, b) use of speaking skills, c) insufficiency of English language production and d) challenges of online education. They all appear to have effects on learners’ language production. Learners stated they produced language more or less according to the following reasons in their statements. The sub-theme, *increase of knowledge*, showed itself as a result of learner variety, that is, since students worked with different students, they reported that they could increase their vocabulary knowledge, learn from one another, and continue conversations easily due to different ideas. As they noted, studying with different people was also a chance to know their classmates better (S4-FF: “When I am talking to different partners, conversations go on, so we share more information with each other. Different people teach me different things like words, phrases...etc.” / S2-OL: “I think I talk more with different people, too. In speaking activities, different ideas come to our minds and we can hear words, idioms and grammar structures that we do not know from different people. Therefore, I can learn different things from them.”). As for the *use of speaking skills*, the learners stated that they could successfully complete the tasks and did not get off the topic. Some of them said that they made more effort to form correct sentences so studying with different learners was beneficial for them (S15-FF: “While studying with different people, I try to make more effort to form correct sentences, so I think this is more beneficial.” / S6-OL: “When I do the speaking tasks with different partners, ...I try to focus on the sentences I am going to form. While my partner is talking, I listen

to him/her carefully and take notes of the words I do not know in his/her sentences. Learning new words makes my sentence formation easier...). The sub-theme *insufficiency of socialization and interaction* was mainly about socialization and interaction issues in the FF group and it covered the points which hinder language production. (S1: “I have less language production because there is a period to adapt to different partners.”). *Insufficiency of English language production* subtheme was related to language production problems with different partners in the OL group (S4: “...While working with different people, we talk less. I cannot focus on the topic because I pay attention not to make vocab mistakes. We do not teach words to each other. After the activities, we do not call and talk to each other. Therefore, I do not think that studying with different partners is fruitful.”). Lastly, *challenges of online education* included the difficulties regarding online education while studying with different partners. (S3: “When I work with different people, I think I exchange less information and keep the conversations short because nobody knows each other well because of online education...” / S20: “...we could not meet a lot of people in the class due to online education. I guess I share less information with different people and the reason might be not knowing them. Normally, I do not think that I have problems with socializing but I seem to have problems with meeting people in front of the computer. I am not comfortable at all.”).

5. Discussion

The results of the qualitative data analysis revealed two main themes and ten sub-themes. The main themes were feelings and English language production process. When the total number of learners (n=40) is considered, the results showed that a great majority of learners had positive feelings toward studying with the same partners in speaking activities in pairs or small groups when compared to those who had positive feelings for different partners. The results also showed that feelings and English language production process were found to affect each other positively or negatively. Generally, positive feelings resulted in more language production, and negative feelings less language production. This result is in line with the findings of previous studies (Littlewood, 2004; MacIntyre & Charos, 1996; MacIntyre et al., 1998; Savaşçı, 2014) that showed that shyness, anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and fear of being despised affected learners' language production and WTC negatively. Another evaluation of feelings-language production relation can be carried out from the point of Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1982, 1989). In this hypothesis, the key issue is how affective factors relate to the second language acquisition process (Krashen, 1982). It is desirable for learners to have high level of motivation and self-confidence but low level of anxiety so that acquisition is achieved. Accordingly, the participants of the current study had a high affective filter with different partners, which resulted in low language production and low affective filter with the same partners, which ensured high language production.

When the FF and OL groups are compared in terms of feelings, while the majority of the learners in both groups had positive feelings for the same partners, those in the FF group had mostly positive feelings and those in the OL group had mostly negative feelings for different partners. This result may be due to the differences in socialization opportunities between the two groups in different learning environments. Most probably, learners in the FF class had more chances to socialize with their peers during the breaks or social activities. Yet, those in the OL class could not do the same because they attended the classes online.

As for language production, in both groups, learners reported that they had more language production with the same partners and less with different partners. However, the number of learners who stated they had more language production with the same partners in the OL group was higher than those in the FF group. Similarly, the number of learners who stated they had less language production with different partners in the OL group was higher than those in the FF group. A possible explanation for this might be different levels of rapport, intimacy, collaboration and socialization in different learning environments. When the whole sample (n=40) is considered, the majority of the learners stated that they talked more, shared more ideas, exchanged more information, in other words produced more language in English while studying with the same partners when compared to different partners.

Developing intimacy positively affected language production process both directly; and indirectly via *positive feelings*, and *collaboration and ease of communication*. Apparently, students in both groups gave

importance to having sincere, intimate relationships with their partners during their performances in communicative activities. Developing intimacy enabled them to feel relaxed, which led to more language production. Moreover, some learners stated that as they started to develop intimacy, they collaborated with their partners easily and their communication got easier. Intimacy between the participants was mentioned in MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) WTC model under the social situation variable (the affective and cognitive contexts), in which one of the factors affecting WTC levels and L2 communication is indicated as the participants. The relationships between the participants are explained in terms of "the power relationship between them, their level of intimacy, the extent of their shared knowledge, and the social distance between them." (p. 553). In line with this, a previous study by Cao and Philip (2006) and Kang (2005) demonstrated that familiarity with speakers was one of several factors affecting learners' WTC behavior in class positively.

The sub-themes, *collaboration and ease of communication*, *increase of knowledge* and *use of speaking skills*, influenced language production positively. The sub-theme, *collaboration and ease of communication*, is a prominent finding of the study, which is shared in both contexts regarding studying with the same partners only. This sub-theme is in line with Vygotsky's (1978) SCT, according to which meaning-making and thinking processes are shaped in social ways with the help of social interactions with other people in the surroundings. Thus, learners construct their own learning actively in social practices of a collaborative group (Brown, 2007). Furthermore, learners' statements under this sub-theme corroborate the key issues in the Interaction (Long, 1980, 1981, 1983a, 1983b, 1996) and Output (Swain, 1985, 1995, 2005) Hypotheses. Output Hypothesis and the updated version of IH find a common ground in that comprehensible input is necessary but not sufficient alone for L2 acquisition so output or language use/production is needed. Accordingly, by using the language or producing output during peer interactions, learners can notice their mistakes, try new structures, test their sentences, and reflect on their own or other people's language productions. In this way, they control and internalize their linguistic knowledge. Likewise, in the present study, the participants mentioned all these actions above. Additionally, more learners (n=14) in the OL group were found to collaborate with their peers than those in the FF group (n=9). This difference between the two educational contexts might support Means et al.'s (2010) study, which showed that the learners in online learning classes accomplished the learning outcomes more successfully than those in the traditional face-to-face classes on the condition that learning environment was collaborative rather than independent. A similar result is provided by Suh (2005), who identified that learners in online groups yielded scaffolding for each other. Those in collaborative groups achieved better outcomes than those who worked individually.

Increase of knowledge sub-theme showed itself in relation to learner variety. Working with different partners may have enabled the learners to increase their vocabulary knowledge, learn from one another, and continue the conversations easily due to a variety of different ideas. Moreover, the learners asserted that it was easy to talk to their partners because different people meant various ideas, so they never had lack of topics to talk about. As they noted, studying with different students was also a chance to know all the classmates better and socialize with them. As they had different levels of English and knowledge, they could hear different pronunciation types and grammar structures from their partners. The *use of speaking skills* sub-theme was related to learners' engagements in speaking skills. Some learners seemed to force themselves to perform better in front of different students. Thus, they tried to support and prove their opinions and show their language abilities in English more when working with different students than the same students. Some of them said that they tried to make more effort to form correct sentences, paid more attention to their speech and did more preparations before they spoke, so studying with different people was beneficial for them. Another finding is that learners' increased knowledge due to different partners helped their use of speaking skills, which shows the relation between these two sub-themes. Some learners asserted that learning new words from different partners helped them make sentences easier, check themselves better by seeing different perspectives, continue conversations, have longer conversations, find more things to tell and more opportunities to talk.

Insufficiency of socialization and interaction, insufficiency of English language production and challenges of online education sub-themes affected language production process negatively. *Insufficiency of socialization and interaction* sub-theme was the only sub-theme that did not recur and it appeared only in the FF context. It was mainly about socialization and interaction problems and covered the points which hinder language production. The points basically reflected a rejection to study with different partners and were stated by a few learners. Most learners in the FF class did not have socialization problems but the learners' statements under this sub-theme may be explained by their personality characteristics and preferences. Among the three occurrences of *insufficiency of English language production* sub-theme, the highest number of codes (n=18) was found under the one regarding studying with different partners in online education. In the OL class, knowing partners well and socializing were desirable but difficult, so while studying with different partners the learners might have had more problems about language production and helped one another less. Besides, as learners' feelings were also related to their language use, negative feelings towards different partners such as anxiety, shyness, fear etc. due to not knowing one another well might have resulted in insufficient use of language. Finally, *challenges of online education* sub-theme arose to reflect the difficulties regarding online education when studying with the same and different partners. The learners in OL group mentioned their insufficiency of language production due to not knowing the partners well and lack of intimacy between them. The findings support previous studies conducted by Sun (2014) and Cancino and Avila (2021), in which insufficient levels of peer interactions and lack of peer rapport affected the learners' interaction, collaborative actions and social presence negatively.

6. Conclusion and Suggestions

The aims of the present study were to reveal whether learners are more willing to communicate and study with the same partners or different partners in speaking activities in pairs or small groups and to compare face-to-face and online education regarding EFL learners' reflections on the same issue. By addressing these aims, this study shed light on learners' experiences upon studying with the same and different partners in communicative activities in pairs or small groups in both contexts. The findings showed that the main themes, feelings and English language production process, were found to affect each other positively or negatively. Generally, positive feelings resulted in more language production, and negative feelings less language production. There were also some assertions by the learners that language production affected feelings. As for the relations of the subthemes, *developing intimacy* positively affected language production both directly; and indirectly via *positive feelings*, and *collaboration and ease of communication*. The sub-themes, *collaboration and ease of communication*, *increase of knowledge* and *use of speaking skills* influenced language production positively. *Increase of knowledge* also affected *use of speaking skills* and in turn language production positively. *Insufficiency of socialization and interaction, insufficiency of English language production and challenges of online education* were found as the sub-themes which affected language production process negatively. Furthermore, the FF group was found to have mostly positive feelings towards studying with both the same and different partners while they thought that their language production was more with the same partners. The majority of the OL group stated that they felt positive towards studying with the same partners and had more language production with the same partners when compared to different partners. When the total number of the learners (n=40) in the study is considered, the majority of the learners had positive feelings for the same partners and they had more language production in speaking activities in pairs or small groups with the same partners when compared to different partners.

The study has several limitations. One limitation has to do with the instrument, the structured written interview to which, due to its nature, the participants may have provided a limited number of opinions. A further study can include oral interviews. Secondly, the participants in this study were elementary and pre-intermediate level students. Further studies can be conducted with advanced level students whose perceptions may differ from beginner level students due to their more experience with working with same and different students in different learning environments.

The present study provides recommendations for language instructors, in particular. If the instructors are teaching online, they may let their learners choose partners to study with throughout a term as the online learners in the present study benefitted from the same partners substantially in terms of language production and feelings. They should also use various teaching-learning materials and techniques, online or hard-copy sources, engaging applications, materials and activities or games in class in order to increase learners' WTC levels. They should have learners do numerous speaking activities in pairs or groups. As learners' feelings may affect their language production substantially, teachers should create friendly, intimate and stress-free environments in the class and encourage peer interaction. Engaging in extracurricular activities such as speaking clubs, movie clubs, discussion clubs, and so forth could be advantageous because learners are likely to be more motivated to participate in these activities. Those environments might promote intimacy and collaboration between the peers or group members.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

Appendix A. The questions in the structured written interview form

1. How do you feel while you are studying with the same partners in communicative activities? Please give examples.
2. Do you believe you exchange more or less information when you are completing the tasks with the same partners than with different partners? Why? Please explain in detail.
3. How do you feel while you are studying with different partners in communicative activities? Please give examples.
4. Do you believe you exchange more or less information when you are completing the tasks with different partners than with the same partners? Why? Please explain in detail.