Discussion-Based Approach to English Language Teaching and Learning
A Digital Dedicated Language Laboratory

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Abstract
One of the most fundamental concerns of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) is to maximize the opportunities of learner-learner talk. Digitalized technological facilities can motivate committed teachers to adapt and adopt innovative ways of teaching oral skills. This article reports on an action research project implemented during one semester with a group of 14 willing Master students at the Department of Foreign Languages, Mohamed Cherif Messadia University, Souk-Ahras, Algeria. The aim was to investigate the effectiveness of the Digital Dedicated Language Laboratory (DDLL) in teaching English through a discussion-based approach. A well designed protocol made up of three types of discussion: *framing, conceptual*, and *application* discussions was adopted. The findings revealed that students were able to develop their linguistic, socio-cultural and pragmatic competences. They were also given the opportunity to exploit the various facilities, and tools available at the DDLL.
Keywords: Action research; digital; discussion; EFL; laboratory; oral skills.

1. Introduction

Traditionally, language researchers and specialists have subscribed to the belief that second and foreign language pedagogy renews and improves itself in three basic ways: innovation through change in teaching methods, innovation through language related sciences and research, and technological innovation. In connection to technological innovative ways, it has been observed that changes in theories of language teaching and learning affect uses of technologies and new technologies affect language teaching and learning theories. (Harmer, 2001)

A surge of combining the utilization of the most fashionable Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) with the up-to-date learner-centered instructional tendencies has been witnessed within the Algerian educational innovations or the so-called LMD (Licence- Master-Doctorat) reform that has been putting down new roots in Algerian universities. The reform aims at ensuring top-quality training for Algerian students through a set of competencies necessary for the promotion of their academic spirit and the achievement of a genuine osmosis with socio-economic environments.

2. Statement of the Problem

It is beyond all disputes that the Tech-based education tendency was due to the tremendous explosion in the diffusion and use of new technologies in our daily life. These new technologies are so widespread that one feels outdated if not using them. There is a continual technological power game in which those who have the latest technology are perceived better than those who do not. Higher Education system in Algeria followed the pace and most universities benefited from the latest technological equipment and facilities which have been placed at the disposal of students of foreign languages. In addition, among the main components of the LMD reform is the integration of the latest technological facilities at the heart of foreign language teaching and learning. Almost all Algerian universities have been equipped with DDLLs and thus supplanting the old-fashioned audio-lingual ones. So, willing to try out innovative new methods, English language Departments are making various attempts to assimilate these new changes gradually. This situation urges English language teachers to look for ways through which DDLLs enhance classroom discussion.

3. Discussion-based Approach: Theoretical Background

Discussion is a term that refers to "talk between two or more people in which thoughts, feelings, and ideas are expressed, questions are asked and answered, or news and information is exchanged" (The *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary).* Thornbury and Slade (2006) defined discussion along seven basic characteristics. Discussion is (1) predominantly *spoken* and based on a set of *prosodic features;* (2) *spontaneous* and *synchronous;* (3) occurs in a *shared context; (4) interactive; (5) interpersonal*; (6) endowed with an *informal style* but in certain communication situations, it takes place *more formally;* (7) revelatory of the speaker's *identity*. Whenever one communicates, one discloses information about one's identity. This latter is never fixed; it is "something which we are constantly building and negotiating all our lives" (Thornborrow, 2004: 158).

It is indisputable that interaction is the most fundamental mode of human communication. Humans are social beings who need to communicate and to establish and strengthen social relationships with people around them, and this can be attained through language. We resort to language and more precisely to discussions to change our beliefs, values, aspirations, hopes and most of all our identities. Vygotsky (1962) claimed that we learn through our interactions and

communications with others. He suggested that learning occurs through the interactions students have with peers, teachers, and other experts. Unfortunately, in Algerian schools and universities the opportunities of second/foreign language learners to talk, interact, and participate in class are very restricted; discussion as an extended communication, often interactive is of minor preoccupation and learners are not given enough opportunity to exchange views on some topics. Discussion is given little attention. It is very frequently limited in English language classroom and issued for comprehension goals rather than for developing students' thinking. Most students remain silent in a classroom, half listening to their teachers as they lecture in front of the room. Teachers still rely on the IRE (**I**nitiate-**R**espond-**E**valuate) traditional model despite its failure to promote students' discussions and thinking at higher levels. Some teachers do insist on their autocratic teaching and do not appreciate discussions with its outcomes and issues. Some others are not certain of its workability with too large sized classes where only few students are taking part while the majority is listening stonily (Dillon, 1994). As we began to shift from teacher-centred to learner-centred model, many laudable efforts to change things have been taking place, and conversation is slowly but surely working its way in order to oust the traditional teacher-driven management of talk. So it is time to start looking at ways to enhance classroom discussion.

Coming back to the nature of communication, it is true that discussion is complex and necessitates not only a sufficient knowledge of the linguistic system in terms of syntactic and grammatical structures, vocabulary and pronunciation, but also the ability to conduct a conversation according to some pragmatic, socio-cultural, and discourse rules. Yet, the two main difficulties encountered by foreign language learners may be divided into two symptoms and root causes: either their unfamiliarity with the different aspects of language and thus inability to produce language suitable for discussion, or the availability for use of such knowledge is not well-exploited; a fact that constrains learners to resort to some communication strategies. Algerian students learn English for academic purposes or as an international language in order to communicate with both native and non-native speakers. It is the case where intelligibility takes precedence over accuracy. Mispronunciations and other communication strategies are tolerated. However, ideally students are at the same time intelligible and accurate. The secret is simply to find the right way to do it in classrooms.

3.1 Discussion-based Approach to English Language Teaching and Learning

Richards and Rogers (2001) proposed a classroom discussion teaching model based on three main levels. The first is the approach, being the set of theories, principles, and sometimes assumptions dealing with not only the structure and representation of language but the way it is taught and learnt as well. The second is the design and concerns objectives, syllabus, tasks, instructional materials, and teachers and learners' roles. The third level is the procedure which is the way things are conducted correctly. Thornbury and Slade (2006) added a fourth level and called it process highlighting the fact that discussion must be used as a means to learn language and not as an end in itself. Process includes topicalization, group organization and teacher's involvement via a set of follow up and evaluative comments.

The discussion-based pattern that has been chosen in the present study is a combination of Richards and Rogers' procedural modal, and Henning's (2008) cyclical approach alternating between teacher's guided discussion and higher students' contribution. This pattern matches Habermas' (1984) theory of communicative action which "describes how students move from their everyday experience and language to more technical academic concepts and language"

(Henning, 2008: 155). Accordingly, students bring from their everyday life some conversational skills, and then use them to learning more technical language and concepts before they eventually integrate them into conversations inside and outside the school setting. The pattern is an extension of the inductive and deductive discussion patterns. The first element *framing* discussion is inductive because the students move from their own experiences to a new learning. The *conceptual* discussion, the second element, is also an inductive discussion whereas the *application* discussion, the third type in the model, is a deductive discussion which moves from concept learning to student experience. The three components are distinguished by the different types of discourse moves used, by the group and accountability strategies, as well as by the amount of preparation required.

A *framing discussion* always takes place at the outset of any lesson or a whole teaching unit and usually before new ideas, concepts and principles are introduced. The teacher begins with questions that elicit opinions based on the students' previous knowledge they acquired through their everyday experience and/or at school. Consequently, students will be more engaged to contribute extensively with very little preparation. The knowledge elicited should be relevant to what is going to be learned later. A framing discussion is, therefore, inductive since it draws from students' experience to learn new concepts. So, it can be an opportunity for the teacher to have an idea and evaluate such knowledge.

Much like the framing discussion, the *conceptual discussion* is inductive; it depends on the students' previous knowledge and experience in order to build up new learning. A conceptual framework aims at supplying students with new concepts, and ideas. It necessitates much more preparation than the framing discussion. Students are exposed to new information through a lecture, some reading or guided activities and through which new concepts and vocabulary are introduced. Students can also work in small groups but a longer time in order to study, develop and share ideas through a group project, for example. At this level, the teacher's interventions occur more frequently to explain key factual information needed when conducting the activity. Many probing questions and follow up discourse moves are used by the teacher. Thus, the conceptual discussion is totally teacher-guided because students face new and difficult concepts and consequently will benefit from the teacher's support whenever needed. There will be less student-to-student interaction, and their answers are mostly brief. It is very likely that discussion will look like the traditional IRE participant framework.

Contrary to the framing discussion and conceptual discussion, the *application discussion* is a deductive framework based, i.e. it comes after sometimes several days of learning and application of new information. It requires much more preparation than the conceptual discussion because students will use newly acquired knowledge in unknown settings and is the last stage of a cycle that begins with their prior experience, then moves to new learning and ends with an application in a real world setting.

In the second level of their model, Richards' and Rogers' (2001) put emphasis on the appropriate and intelligent utilization of tools when designing language teaching tasks. Yet, a teaching tool is nothing if pedagogy does not keep pace. Several studies have documented that foreign language learning and teaching relies upon the classical pedagogical triangle: teacher, learner, and content.

Nevertheless, research has made it clear that the classroom setting plays a significant role in learning (Egbert, 1993). It evolves in parallel with the teaching approach and method. It used to be traditional and then has become modern and technological. So, a DDLL is a technological classroom where EFL is taught and learnt differently. In reality, a language laboratory is not only

a classroom but rather a combination of space and media (tools). To be truly dedicated to language teaching, it must be equipped appropriately. If inadvertently or purposely, the tools are not exploited, the laboratory becomes a simple classroom.

It is for that very reason that the classical pedagogic triangle has to be reexamined by reversing the classical classroom pattern to a new pattern that assures the space the significance it has. So, the classroom will be in the foreground and the whole teaching and learning process will result in a pedagogical four-sided pyramid instead of a triangle as it is proposed in Figure 1:
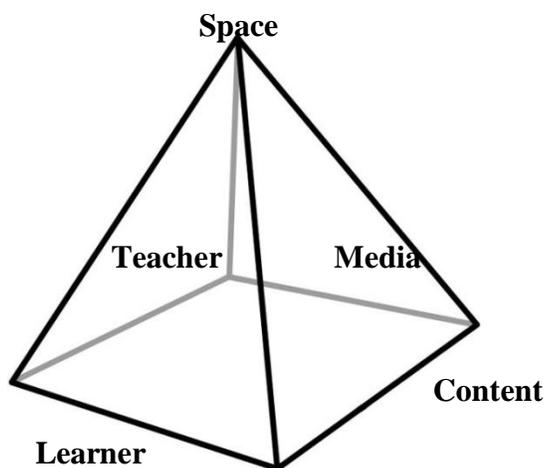
Figure 1: Pedagogical Four-sided Pyramid

*Figure 1***: Pedagogical Four-sided Pyramid**

Space is put at the top of the pyramid in order to highlight the notion that it is dedicated, and the four other components revolve around it much like satellites. They coexist for a unique goal which is learning language. Such conceptualization will lead to bring about four modeling pedagogical situations:

Space

Learner-Teacher   Learner-Content   Teacher-Media   Content-Media
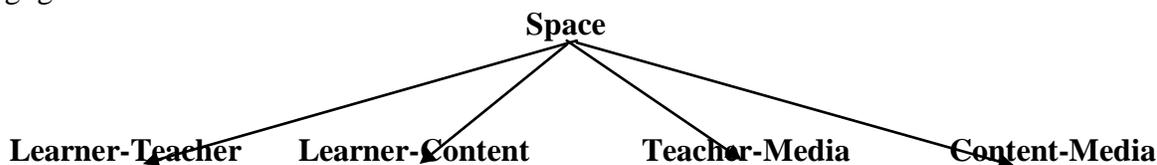
Furthermore, four other interactions can take place at the base of the pyramid:

Learner – teacher - content	**Learner - teacher - media**
Teacher - media - content	**Learner - media - content**

It is worthy to note that the DDLL is not a method but a medium or an environment in which a wide variety of methods, approaches or pedagogical philosophies may be implemented. As a consequence, a true and full integration of DDLLs in foreign language pedagogy has become an urgent issue. An implementation policy depends very tightly upon a certain number of determining factors among which the educational policy of the higher authorities, the institutional vision, individual teachers' philosophy and practice in adopting and adapting this new environment, and learners' ability, and motivation (McCarthy, 1999). At the institutional level, the University, for example, a strategic technology planning must exist. It is a whole process of change that requires university agents, administrators, teachers and learners, to change their ideas about how teachers teach and how students learn. As for teachers, they need training, information and clear demonstration that the use of DDLLs enhances existing teaching by leading students to better understanding, manipulation or use of languages. A true integration presupposes also the generation of positive attitudes on the part of the learners.

4. A Digital Dedicated Language Laboratory: An Experiential Study

This study can help to refine our understanding of the new concepts of Technology-Enhanced Language Learning and demonstrate that the future of EFL teaching and learning in Algerian universities is in the normalization of such facilities. These days it is a common place for educationalists to talk of the pedagogical character of the new technologies. Davies, Bangs, Frisby, and Walton, (2005) claim that today's learners are digital natives. They use new technologies not only to learn and work but to socialize, get information, and entertain as well. They are prone to explore and exploit them in extraordinary manner and rate. It is a sterling fact that urges educational authorities as well as teachers to reconsider their beliefs about these learners, their needs and potentialities, and the urgent implementation of new technological facilities in foreign language classrooms. We live in a time of change; so DDLLs have to be redefined as valuable parts of daily English language instruction. University students will be more productive, self-determinant and responsible of their own learning. Moreover, with a certain degree of willingness, welcome and awareness, English language teachers will become more technologically competent.

4.1 Research Question and Aim

Drawing on what was said earlier, the study investigated *what benefits a DDLL can offer to EFL teaching and learning of 'classroom discussion'*. In this respect the aim of the study is not to challenge or support a teaching theory but rather find out new and better ways of doing things. Henceforth, particular goals for the ongoing utilization of a DDLL through a discussion-based approach to EFL teaching and learning are set to:
   a. Empower Algerian university students' oral and interactive skills.
   b. Enrich Algerian students' socio-cultural knowledge.
   c. Lower any pervasive affective factors vis-à-vis English language learning
   d. Give strength to English teachers' roles and responsibilities as active agents of pedagogical and technological change.

4.2 Methodology Design

Since the aim of the present study was to improve DDLLs practice and render it more efficient, an action research cyclical process was adopted in 2013 during a whole semester (14 weeks) at the Department of Foreign Languages, Mohamed-Cherif Messadia University, Souk-Ahras,

Algeria. Coghlan and Brannick's (2010) spiral model made up of four linked phases (Figure 2) was chosen and adapted to the purpose of the study.
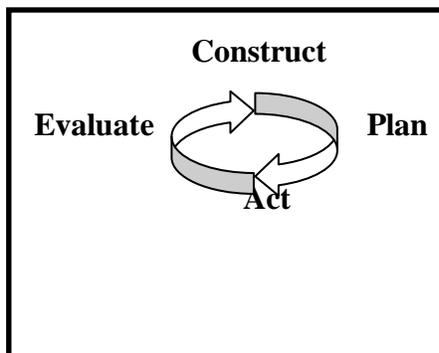

Figure 2: **Spiral Model of Action Research. (Adpated from Coghlan and Brannick, 2010)**

Collaborative action research as a cyclical reflective process with four main linked phases was chosen: *construct, plan, act*, and *evaluate*. It is an enquiry which aims at improving and rendering practice more efficient.

4.3 Participants

Over a 14-week period, 9 female and 5 male willing Master students from the Department of Foreign Languages were selected according to a convenience sampling protocol. They were informed that the learning sessions in the DDLL during that period were outside regular class hours and not compulsory. Every participant was asked to keep a journal to write remarks, ideas and even track changes to be discussed in a group meeting following each cycle.

4.4 Procedure

It is important to note that this study is concerned with the two first cycles. In cycle 1, the first phase, various attempts are made to construct an idea about the reasons and the motives behind the underuse of the DDLL by teachers and students at the Department of Foreign Languages. Once the problem was identified and data were gathered and interpreted through questionnaires and interviews, a plan for action was collaboratively decided. It addressed answers to six questions (Table 1): who (students), what (topic /content-based syllabus), how (teaching method), why (reasons / goals), where (DDLL), and when (time).

Table 1. *Action Research (Cycle 1)*

Action Research (Cycle 1)					
Participants (Who)	Content (What)	Design (How)	Goal (Why/for what)	Setting (where)	Time (When)
14 students (master 2)	Use of the DDLL	Dialogic discussion	Acquiring technical competence	DDLL	Week 1

The third phase is action. The last stage deals with evaluation which involved assessing what was done, interpreting the effects of the action and whether there was an improvement or not.

On the basis of the results, interpretations and reflections, cycle 2 started with focus on discussion-based approach to English language learning. During phase one, the whole group of Master 2 (35 students) started a new topic; read a text on interpersonal communication, did some comprehension, grammar, and vocabulary activities in a normal classroom. Then, what to be done in the DDLL with the selected 14 students was decided and planned as it is shown in table 2. The action phase was concerned with the application of the three-folded discussion-based framework. The recorded data helped to reflect on what was practiced and identify issues for improvement during the next cycle.

Table 2. *Action Research (Cycle 2)*

Action Research (Cycle 1)					
Participants (Who)	**Content (What)**	**Design (How)**	**Goal (Why/for what)**	**Setting (where)**	**Time (When)**
14 students (Master)	Good vs poor conversation styles	Framing + conceptual + application discussion	linguistic, sociocultural, pragmatic	DDLL	Week 2

4.5 Data Gathering and Analysis

Since the present study investigates the possibility to adopt the DDLL as a legitimate instructional tool to enhance EFL learners' communicative competence through a structured discussion-based approach, it was thought necessary to triangulate the data sources: **(a)** closed and open response questionnaires in order to collect and elicit data on the teachers and students' attitudes and experiences with respect to the utilization of the DDLL. **(b)** Systematic classroom observation of the whole learning context via audio-visual recordings. **(c)** Students' journals containing ideas, remarks, and comments. **(d)** Group meetings following each cycle.

As for the analysis of data, both quantitative and qualitative methods were used. At first, the qualitative data were analyzed separately then were compared and categorized (Table 3) according to Richards' and Rogers' (2001) scheme:

Table 3. *Discussion-based Procedural Scheme (Adapted from Richards and Rodgers, 2001)*

Discussion-based Procedural Scheme	
***	Eclectic
Objectives	Interactional oral skills
Content	Topic-based
Activities	Communicative-focused
Instructional Materials	Content and objective-related
Teacher's role	Guide, facilitator, catalyst
Learner's role	More responsible but still requiring guidance

5. Findings

(i) Introduction to the Digital Dedicated Language Laboratory: Cycle 1

Traditionally, some researchers (Davies, Bangs, Frisby, & Walton, 2005) have subscribed to the belief that a language laboratory is useful when the teacher knows how to use it skillfully. Such competence and craftsmanship must not be swamped and disrupted by fear, reluctance, or ignorance. The findings that emerged from the response to the questionnaires destined to both teachers and students of the department indicate that the DDLL which was purchased and installed in 2008 has never been exploited but used as an ordinary classroom. The laboratory (Sanako Lab 100) was equipped with only one computer for the instructor station linked to 14 carrel stations for students arranged in U-shape, endowed with audio panels with high-quality digital audio, and headphones. The students asserted that they have never manipulated such facility. Instructions not to touch them were very clear. As for teachers, they argue that they do not have any idea on how to exploit the DDLL for three reasons: (1) they did not get any training; (2) they were instructed not to try it, and (3) the new learning/teaching model does not conform to their ideas, and so they choose to go on with the conventional teaching practices of oral skills. In this respect, Davies, Bangs, Frisby, and Walton (2005) have conclusively shown that in order to overcome such attitudinal problems, teachers need training, information and clear demonstration that the use of language laboratories enhances the existing teaching by leading students to better understanding, manipulation and use of the target language.

The results helped design cycle 1 which attempted to probe into introducing the DDLL to the 14 willing students. Eventually, they received explanations on the functionality of each component mainly the audio panel, and some instructions in terms of manipulation and security. The course lasted one hour and half during which students were encouraged to ask questions. It was observed that the students were very motivated and were able to manipulate the different tools. A surprising interaction was detected. Students supported each other in identifying the components and their use. Some other students suggested that recommendations posters should be pinned up.

During cycle 1, despite repetitive attempts, it was very hard to gather the N= 22 teachers of the department to discuss the workability of the DDLL; unfortunately only n=5 teachers decided to take up the challenge and play the game. These teachers were solicited to collaborate during the project. They observed the courses and took part in group meetings following each cycle.

(ii) Discussion-Based Approach to English Language Teaching and Learning:Cycle 2

The results of Cycle 2 provide insights into the importance of structuring the discussion. The teaching method was eclectic due to the fact that speaking is an extremely complex skill that necessitates not only a sufficient knowledge of the linguistic system in terms of syntactic and grammatical structures, vocabulary and pronunciation, but the ability to conduct a conversation and tackle problems according to some pragmatic, socio-cultural, and discourse rules. As for the content, the prompt that was chosen dealt with *interpersonal communication and identification of the good as well as the poor discussion styles.*
Based on the proposed model, the three types of discussion took place during the action phase.

5.1 The Framing Discussion

The findings revealed that the discussion was ensured because of, firstly, the right choice of the topic favored by the individual and social values of the students, and secondly the students' increased knowledge during the constructing phase that took place in an ordinary classroom. Henning (2008) referred to this situation as a *'low risk environment'*, where students were encouraged to comment, and react to the conversation styles of different people they meet on social occasions. A head projector was used to show some pictures associated with the topic and a pair-discussion session was set up by the teacher via the computer system. The pairs were randomized giving a chance to change the pairs after a short time so that each student was able to comment on the pictures with many students in a low risk environment. It was obvious that the teacher could hear what the students were saying and supply them with some information or directives such as not to use the mother tongue. The recorded data showed that there was some teacher guidance through follow up comments might be because it was the first experience for students. Surprisingly, the majority of students was at ease with the technology and excited to talk to each other in English.

5.2 The Conceptual Discussion

Conceptual discussion, though inductive and dependent on students' previous experience, is more teacher-guided. New ideas and concepts in relation to the main topic and to what was done previously were introduced. With the help of a head projector some descriptive texts along with the pictures were shown and the students were asked to match them and then decide on the good and bad discussion styles. It was a very enriching opportunity for the students to learn new vocabulary and adequate grammatical structures; they were motivated and interested in different things in the laboratory. A new session was created and group-discussion activity was selected. The system allowed forming three groups manually. Frequent explanations of key factual information were provided to students. From time to time, the 'intercom' was used to hear what was going on. Still, the recorded data indicated that some students did not respect communicative strategies. They talked at the same time and interrupted each other very frequently. With the help of the teachers, they acquired new notions on good and poor conversationalists such as: *the bragger, the bore, the interrupter, the liar, the gossipy, etc*. Some students commented upon their friends' behavior during the group-discussion activity accusing them as being interrupters. The researchers seized the opportunity and asked the students to comment such behaviors, whether good or bad using appropriate adjectives in a well-structured forms: *it's + adjective + to + verb / Gerund + is + adjective*. The activity necessitated direct teacher's cues, explanations, recapitulations, and reformulations.

5.3 The Application Discussion

This type of discussion allowed the students to apply and integrate what they learnt into a real setting experience (Henning, 2008). For the researchers, it was the ultimate opportunity to evaluate the students' new learning. Thus, they started a new session, selected the whole fixed group-discussion activity, and created a discussion question made available on the projector. Students were asked to discuss freely on the following prompts: *Have you ever met anyone who*:
- *Asks about other people's personal business?*
- *Always whispers secrets to his friends in front of other people?*
- *Interrupts someone else's story?*
- *Speaks foreign language in front of people who don't understand it?*

The students' progression to discussions was apparent. The experiment produced a remarkable transformative learning experience for the students. Students' longer coherent interventions using appropriate vocabulary and structural forms were striking. Most of the moves were made up of high frequency words such as basic evaluative adjectives, verbs, basic adverbs, discourse markers, modals. However some students used a lot of pause fillers, hedging and repeated what they said. Sometimes, their moves were truncated. They avoided interrupting each other. Each one had the opportunity to hold the floor for a certain time. They answered to each other eliciting questions. Most importantly, the students' moves outnumbered considerably the teacher's. At the same time teachers, as reported by Thornbury and Slade (2006), went on supporting students through cuing and few recapitulations, reformulations and repetitions.

6. Conclusion

The present paper aimed to explore the utility of the DDLL in a discussion-based approach to teaching and learning EFL. The choice of the action research was done on purpose to find out ways to improve the teaching and learning practices. Although the results cannot be definitive, they are indicative. They reveal that with a well-designed protocol and an intelligent exploitation of the DDLL potentialities, our students will be able to develop their English language learning (accuracy) as well as learn the art of taking part in discussions inside and outside the classroom. Overall, these results could foster other teachers to undertake other action research projects in their own institutions.

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