

High and Low-Proficiency EFL Learners' Attitudes Toward Homogeneous Versus Heterogeneous Pairing: A Qualitative Inquiry

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High and Low-Proficiency EFL Learners' Attitudes Toward Homogeneous Versus Heterogeneous Pairing: A Qualitative Inquiry

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ABSTRACT

Generally, learners' attitudes can significantly influence educational practices and policies. This qualitative study investigated high- and low-proficiency English as a foreign language (EFL) learners' attitude toward homogeneous versus heterogeneous pairing in writing classrooms. A total of 72 Iranian EFL learners were categorized into high (H) and low (L) proficiency levels using the Oxford Quick Placement Test and divided into three groups: one heterogeneous group (H-L pairs, n=28) and two homogenous ones (H-H pairs, n=22 & L-L pairs, n=22). After 15 sessions of collaborative writing tasks, semi-structures interviews were conducted. Thematic analysis using NVivo software revealed that both high- and low-proficiency EFL learners perceived homogenous pairing more interesting and effective than heterogeneous pairing. Additionally, low-proficiency learners preferred heterogeneous pairing more than their high-proficiency counterparts. The findings offer valuable insights and implications for EFL educators and stakeholders in the education sector.

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The growing interest in communicative approaches to English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching has led to the widespread adoption of collaborative learning techniques, particularly pair work whose positive consequences in EFL instruction have recently been predominant (Dobao & Blum, 2013; Storch, 2001; Susant et al., 2020). Pair-work activities encourage learners to engage in natural language use, promote negotiation of meaning, and reduce anxiety, ultimately fostering greater confidence leading them to better academic outcomes (Namaziandost et al., 2020; Wigglesworth & Storch, 2009). Grounded in Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory (SCT), this collaborative approach suggests that learners can achieve more in conjunction with peers than they could on their own. As students engage in foreign language tasks, they pool their linguistic resources to effectively tackle language challenges (Johnson et al., 2000; Neumann & McDonough, 2015; Storch, 2001).

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While collaborative pair work has been established as a significant communicative practice within EFL contexts, an important question remains regarding the most effective pairing strategy to optimize learning outcomes. Specifically, educators implementing collaborative pair work must address how to best pair students to provide effective scaffolding and enhance learning (Alfino et al., 2022; Shehadeh, 2011). Language proficiency has commonly been suggested as an effective criterion for composing pairs by many researchers (e.g., Adodo & Agbayewa, 2011; Baer, 2003; Storch & Aldosari, 2012; Susanti et al., 2020; Watanabe & Swain, 2007). Accordingly, based on their overall language proficiency, EFL learners can be paired homogeneously (High-High & Low-Low) or heterogeneously (High-Low) (Alfino et al., 2022; Dobao & Blum, 2013; Zabihi & Rezazadeh, 2013). Understanding the implications of these pairing strategies is essential, as the outcomes of homogeneous versus heterogeneous pairings can vary widely.

Apart from the positive or negative outcomes of homogeneous versus heterogeneous pairing in EFL learning context (e.g., Adodo & Agbayewa, 2011; Fakhri Ajabshir & Panahifar, 2020; Karimi & Jalilvand, 2014; Storch & Aldosari, 2012), it is vital to examine learners' attitudes toward these pairing strategies, as this can provide crucial insights into the success of teaching methodologies (Dotzel et al., 2021). A growing body of literature has demonstrated that positive attitudes among learners enhance motivation, engagement, and overall academic performance (e.g., Adodo & Agbayewa, 2011; Else-Quest et al., 2013; Ghaith & Bouzeineddine, 2003). Moreover, recognizing the differing perspectives of high- and low-proficiency learners regarding the effectiveness of homogeneous and heterogeneous pairings is critical for addressing diverse learning needs within EFL classrooms.

Among the language abilities that can be influenced by collaborative pair work instruction, EFL writing is known as an important skill due to its dual role as both a medium of communication and an assessment criterion for EFL proficiency. In classroom settings and formal scenarios, writing serves as a key modality for information exchange, idea expression, and knowledge sharing (Indrilla & Ciptaningrum, 2018; Jee & Aziz, 2021; Manegre & Gutiérrez-Colón, 2020; Veramuthu & Shah, 2020). However, many EFL teachers struggle to help learners articulate their thought effectively in English largely due to the limited opportunities available for authentic interaction in English (Housen & Kuiken, 2009; Ong & Zhang, 2010; Rajablou & Shirvan, 2017; Shirbagi, 2010; Zamani, 2016).

Therefore, fostering an awareness among EFL teachers and researchers about the attitudes of high- and low-proficiency learners toward different pairing types during cooperative writing activities seems to be essential. Such insights can aid in tailoring instructional strategies, optimizing group dynamics, and creating a more supportive and motivating learning environment that meets the diverse needs and preferences of all students. Despite its significance, there remains a notable gap in research examining learners' perspectives on this matter (e.g., Veramuthu & Shah, 2020).

2. Literature Review

Regarding homogeneous versus heterogeneous pairings' educational outcomes for high- and low-proficiency learners, Adodo and Agbayewa (2011), Baer (2003), Kian-sam (1999), and Smieja (2012) show that only high-ability students benefit from the homogeneous group while average and low-ability students performed better in heterogeneous groups. It is believed that high-proficiency learners maintain their interest and motivation in homogeneous groups but when grouped with low-proficiency learners, their competence declines. On the other hand, Kian-sam (1999), Poole (2008), Smieja (2012), Tutty and Klein (2008), Venkatakrisnan and Wiliam (2003), and Zamani (2016) revealed that cooperative learning in heterogeneous pairing could be especially beneficial for low-proficiency students. However, Susanti et al.'s (2020) findings revealed that both high- and low-proficiency students who experienced collaborative writing in homogenous proficiency pairings have better writing ability than those who experienced

collaborative writing in heterogeneous proficiency pairings. Thus, it seems that high- and low-proficiency learners reveal inconsistent outcomes in different pairing types.

In addition, most studies reported learners' positive attitude towards collaborative tasks in general (e.g., Farzaneh & Nejadansari, 2014; Ghaith, 2001; Limbu & Markauskaite, 2015; Mahmoud, 2014; Shehadeh, 2011) and collaborative writing tasks in particular (e.g., Dobao & Blum, 2013; Govindasamy & Shah, 2020; Mahmoud, 2014; Veramuthu & Shah, 2020). In these studies, learners reported that collaborative writing tasks provided learners with more chances to participate in their learning process, create more ideas and knowledge to share, and develop their general language skills, in particular their writing skills. More particularly, Faris (2009) investigated the effect of homogeneous versus heterogeneous collaborative learning in multicultural classes on the students' attitudes. The findings implied that the heterogeneous group had significantly positive attitudes toward that type of grouping. Moreover, Donovan et al. (2018) and Dotzel et al. (2021) confirmed the same finding.

Thus, the previous research mostly has focused on examining learners' attitudes toward collaborative writing, and very scarcely on their attitudes about homogeneous versus heterogeneous pairing or grouping. To the best of our knowledge, no research has examined high- and low-proficiency EFL learners' attitudes separately. By examining high- and low-proficiency EFL learners' attitudes toward homogeneous versus heterogeneous pairing in writing classes, educators can gain insight into how different pairing types may affect learning outcomes for learners at different proficiency levels and can help educators ensure that all students feel supported in the classroom. Thus, educators can make informed decisions to create a more equitable learning environment for all students and design activities that better support their engagement and motivation, ultimately enhancing the overall learning experience for EFL students. Therefore, the present study aimed to investigate high- and low-proficiency learners' attitudes toward homogeneous versus heterogeneous pairing in collaborative EFL writing activities.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The participants of this study were 72 Iranian female EFL learners aged 14-18 enrolled at Milad Language Institute in Pars Abad, Iran. They were selected out of the body of 128 EFL learners already placed by the institute's administration at different levels of intermediate, upper-intermediate, and advanced. The reason for adopting the different proficiency levels was to have access to an adequate number of high (H) and low (L) proficiency EFL learners. Thus, the participants of this study were selected by purposive sampling according to their language proficiency levels.

Based on the results of the Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT), two levels of proficiency (i.e., H & L) were identified. Next, they were assigned to three experimental groups, that is one heterogeneous group (including H-L pairs, $n = 28$) and two homogenous groups (including H-H pairs, $n = 22$ & L-L pairs, $n = 22$).

The number of participants in this study was not pre-determined; they accumulated as many as possible.

3.2. Data Collection Instruments

To comprehensively address the research objective posed in this study, three data collection instruments were employed. The following instruments were carefully selected to gather relevant information and provide insights into the participants' experiences and attitudes.

3.2.1. Oxford quick placement test (OQPT)

The Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT) was administered initially to check the participants' current English proficiency levels to divide them into high- and low-proficiency EFL learners. OQPT is both easy to administer and practical for grading students into different levels of proficiency (Edwards, 2007). It has 60 multiple-choice questions measuring learners' knowledge of grammar, vocabulary, and writing ability. Furthermore, the reliability and construct validity of this test have been confirmed by many studies (e.g., Abbasi Dogolsara et al., 2022; Tavakoli & Rezazadeh, 2014). However, for the current study, OQPT was piloted using a similar and small sample size, and its internal reliability was calculated by Cronbach's alpha coefficients ($\alpha=0.80$) indicating an acceptable level of reliability estimate. Moreover, a panel of experts confirmed its validity.

3.2.2. IELTS general writing task 2

The topics presented in IELTS General Writing Task 2 (Appendix A), developed by Cambridge University, were employed during the instructional course, requiring learners to collaboratively write a composition in response to a statement or question. The rationale for utilizing this task was its status as an internationally recognized and widely employed English assessment, featuring topics suitable for learners across a range of proficiency levels, from low to high. The selected topics encompassed education, friends and families, art, TV, and media, all of which were of interest to participants within their age range. Each topic included a question prompting learners to engage in collaborative discussions, develop ideas, and express them as clearly, fluently, and accurately as possible.

3.2.3. Attitude questionnaire

A semi-structured interview (modeled by Ghanbari & Abdolrezapour, 2020, Appendix B) was employed in order to find out the individual participants' attitudes towards collaborative writing in pair work and to make a comparison and conclusion about which pairing type (i.e., homogeneous or heterogeneous) developed more positive attitudes and inspirations in Iranian high- and low-proficiency EFL learners. A semi-structured interview is a qualitative research method that involves conducting an interview with a set of pre-determined open-ended questions. This method allows for in-depth exploration of the participants' perceptions, attitudes, and insights providing rich and detailed qualitative data about the participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To reduce any linguistic and psychological tension, the interview items were asked in written form and in simple English without any time pressure to prevent any probable language hindrances. Then, the interview papers were analyzed and investigated for further thematic analysis.

3.4. Design, Procedures, and Data Analysis

This qualitative research examined Iranian high- and low-proficiency EFL learners' attitudes towards pairing types (i.e., homogeneous vs. heterogeneous) in collaborative writing tasks. Before conducting the main study, a pilot study was carried out to precisely assess the quality of the writing task and interview items. This included evaluating the effectiveness of the topics, inter-rater reliability, content validity, the necessary time allocation, and any potential issues encountered during data collection period. Concurrently, the reliability and validity of the OQPT were also assessed.

Initially, all 128 intermediate, upper-intermediate, and advanced EFL learners took OQPT and according to the results, 72 learners who scored between one and three standard deviations (SD) above

and below the mean score were selected to participate in this study. The participants within one to three SD above the mean score (with OQPT score of 47-55) were labeled as high-proficiency learners (H, n= 36) and the participants within one to three SD below the mean score (with OQPT score of 27-31) were labeled as low-proficiency learners (L, n=36). The rationale for not involving the participants within one SD above and below the mean was to widen the gap between the high and low learners. Then, out of 36 high learners, 22 of them (i.e., 11 H-H pairs) were randomly assigned to the homogeneous H-H group, and out of 36 low learners, 22 of them (i.e., 11 L-L pairs) were randomly assigned to the homogeneous L-L paired group. The remaining high achievers (n=14) were randomly paired heterogeneously with the remaining low achievers (n=14) into 14 H-L pairs in the third experimental group. In the H-L paired group, the participants were ranked from 1-28 according to their scores and then, they were paired heterogeneously according to Table 1.

Table 1

Heterogeneous Pairing of the Participants in H-L Paired Group

High ranks	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
Low ranks	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28

In addition, these three classes were taught by the same teacher (i.e., the researcher) to make sure that the teaching procedure for the three classes was the same during treatment.

Before initiating the instructional course, which lasted for 15 sessions, the researcher, as a teacher, provided the three classes with a detailed explanation of collaborative writing. They were reminded that simply sitting together in pairs did not create a collaborative task, rather to develop a positive interdependence they should have a significantly mutual contribution to the jointly produced compositions. The researcher also changed the traditional setting of the class in a way to facilitate pair collaborations.

Then, in each session, one topic in the form of a question was presented to them. It should be noted that before writing about the topics, the teacher provided an informal oral opinion poll about each topic to make sure students had sufficient topical knowledge and to elicit sufficient data. Then, the participants were asked to share their ideas with their peers in pairs to write a rough draft, and finally after peer reviewing, write the final shared composition in 50 minutes. Meanwhile, the teacher supervised the collaboration between peers. In the end, the written compositions were collected, corrected by the teacher, and delivered to each pair in the next session. The pairs were asked to examine their jointly produced writings regarding the teacher's comments and feedback and collaboratively revise the previous session's written task before starting the new composition.

Upon passing the 15-session collaborative writing tasks, the 72 Iranian high- and low-proficiency EFL learners within three experimental groups (H-H, L-L, & H-L) were given a semi-structures interview in a paper and asked to answer them honestly. The purpose was to check their attitudes about the homogeneous or heterogeneous pairing type that they were involved in. They were informed that the grammatical or spelling errors were not important but their true ideas and opinions toward the interview questions would be taken into deep consideration. Furthermore, they were ensured that their answers to the interview questions would be kept confidential. Thus, they answered the open-ended question in the semi-structured interview and presented their positive or negative attitudes towards their collaboration in that particular pairing type, producing a total of 3229 English words. The collected qualitative data (M = 44.84 words for each responded participant) was transcribed into a Word document and organized into

four sections, that is, the high-proficient learners' texts in the homogeneous group (M = 52.22 words), the high-proficient learners' texts in the heterogeneous group (M = 50.57 words), the low-proficient learners' texts in the homogeneous group (M = 43.22 words), and the low-proficient learners' texts in the heterogeneous group (M = 30.07 words).

To conduct the qualitative data analysis of the study, examining the high- and low-proficiency learners' attitudes toward their experienced collaboration in homogeneous or heterogeneous pairs, the organized data were thematically coded and analyzed in NVivo software to facilitate qualitative analysis. The thematic analysis involved an iterative coding process, where initial codes were generated from the data, followed by a refinement phase to identify broader themes. To ensure inter-coder reliability, a second researcher independently coded a subset of the data, and discrepancies were discussed and resolved, leading to a consensus on the final themes. This rigorous approach enhances the transparency and credibility of the findings.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Overview of High- and Low-Proficiency EFL Learners' Attitudes Toward the Homogeneous vs. Heterogeneous Pairing Types

A summary of the content analysis of the participants' responses to the interview questions demonstrated that high-proficiency learners almost consistently expressed positive views toward homogeneous pairing. In addition, low-proficiency learners appeared to express mostly positive attitudes, however a small proportion disliked homogeneous pairing (Table 2).

Table 2

High- and Low-Proficiency EFL Learners' Attitudes Toward Homogeneous Pairing Type

	Positive views	Negative views	Total
High-Proficiency	21 (95%)	1 (5%)	22 (100%)
Low-Proficiency	17 (64%)	5 (23%)	22 (100%)

Moreover, examining heterogeneously paired group's attitudes, we found that a very small proportion of high-proficiency learners favored L-H pairings and most of them disliked that type of pairing. Low-proficiency learners, however, revealed almost substantial proportion of both positive and negative attitudes toward heterogeneously paired collaborative activities (Table 3).

Table 3

High- and Low-Proficiency EFL Learners' Attitudes Toward Heterogeneous Pairing Type

	Positive views	Negative views	Total
High-Proficiency	4 (28%)	10 (72%)	14 (100%)
Low-Proficiency	8 (57%)	6 (43%)	14 (100%)

In the following, to unpack these attitudes, we attempted to consider or justify the reasons that each group of learners offered for preferring or disliking that pairing type.

4.2. High-Proficient EFL Learners' Attitudes Towards Their Collaboration in Homogeneous H-H Pairing

According to the thematic analysis of the data collected by NVivo, a significant proportion (95%) of the high-proficient EFL learners exhibited positive attitudes toward their collaboration in H-H homogeneous pairs. This result is in line with the previous research (Adodo & Agbayewa, 2011; Baer, 2003; Kian-sam, 1999; Smieja, 2012) claiming on the outperformance of high-proficiency learners in such grouping. Broadly speaking, they perceived collaboration in H-H homogeneous pairs as a valuable opportunity for mutual English development and advanced practice with peers of similar proficiency. It allowed for giving and receiving constructive feedback, receiving support and guidance, meaningful communication, engaging in complex discussions, building confidence in self-expression, and enjoying a fun and motivating classroom environment. Some of the answers were randomly selected as follows:

"I learned a lot from the cooperation with my peer. It was a nice experience for me because we could share our knowledge with each other. My friend helped me learn some words and phrases. We laughed a lot" (H3).

"Every session I was motivated to go to English class because I worked with my friend on writing a text or composition. We could improve our writing ability. We had very advanced and high-level discussions in English." (H8)

"I prefer to use this method for the next semester because my friend is very smart and cute. He has great ideas about the topics."(H11)

"This semester, I liked writing tasks because we had great communication and discussions. I think it is better than writing alone. I also teach something to my friend. And I learned from her. Sometimes, we asked some questions from the teacher. No, we did not have any problems and I prefer this way for the next term. It was cool..." (H12)

"In the pair with my friend, I wasn't stressed and spoke English about the topics with confidence. Unfortunately, in the class I got stressed with the teacher and all my classmates. Yes, I prefer this way." (H18)

"Yea why not. We can use this method for speaking as well. Because we are comfortable with each other. I mean more than teacher..." (H21)

The only high-proficient learner who disliked H-H pairing (H5) stated that "I prefer to cooperate just with the teacher because I don't trust the knowledge of my friend. We are in the same level. She must be higher than me to make me higher". It shows the existence of the preference of heterogeneously pairing even among high-proficient learners because one might favor being scaffolded with much higher peers.

4.3. Low-Proficient EFL Learners' Attitudes toward their Collaboration in Homogeneous L-L Pairing

Thematic analysis revealed that 64% of low-proficient EFL learners had positive attitudes toward collaborating in L-L homogeneous pairs. They valued the empathy and understanding that such pairings offered, feeling more comfortable practicing language skills with peers at a similar proficiency level. This environment was perceived as safe and non-threatening, reducing pressure during communication and

boosting their confidence. Additionally, they appreciated the opportunity to learn from each other's mistakes and feedback, further enhancing their language improvement. Some views were randomly selected as follows:

"It was very good because it was easy to learn from a friend. I didn't have stress and fear. We have fun very much." (L11)

"Yes, we had good time with each other. I like English very much. My friend is very kind. Thank you." (L5)

"Yes, I think it was ok because both of us had problems and learned with each other. We didn't have stress because it was fun." (L16)

"I think it is a good way because we can learn when we correct our mistakes and problems. And we ask from teacher. It was very fun. Actually, my friend had more mistakes than I." (L8)

However, a small percentage of low-proficient learners (23%) expressed negative feelings about pairing with peers of the same proficiency, believing it limited their exposure to advanced language usage. They were concerned that practicing with peers who shared similar language challenges could reinforce their errors. Additionally, they felt that the lack of sufficient linguistic and communicative competence hindered effective interaction and collaboration. These views are as follows:

"No because I think we have many problems and we cannot solve because we don't know the grammar. It was hard. We were lazy or stupid.... I don't know." (L2)

"I think we need a teacher or a clever student. All of my problems was remained. I fear from exam. My friend was very cold..." (L6)

"Our problem was that we couldn't have idea about the topics. And we didn't know all the words to write. We needed teacher to help us." (L13)

"Oh no. Because this time was useless, and we didn't learn English. Most of the time we spoke in Turkish about other topics."(L20)

"Teacher I told to you many times that we come to class to learn something from you. Always our writing had many errors that we did not learn because I and Aylar are very weak in grammar." (L21)

4.4. High-Proficient EFL Learners' Attitudes toward their Collaboration in Heterogeneous H-L Pairing

The thematic analysis of the high-proficient learners' answers in the H-L heterogeneous group revealed some contradictory findings. While some of them (28%) expressed positive feelings about their collaboration in heterogeneous pairs, most (72%) reported negative attitudes toward being paired with lower-proficient ones.

The former high-proficient learners viewed pairing with lower-proficient peers as an opportunity to exhibit their leadership, share their language knowledge, and assist in their peers' improvement. They derived enjoyment from fostering a positive learning environment and motivating their peers to enhance

their language skills. Thus, their positive attitudes in heterogeneous pairs appear to stem from psychological and behavioral factors rather than purely pedagogical ones. These views are as follows:

“I always like to be a teacher and in the pair I really enjoyed playing a teacher and leader role. When I guided my classmate in the pair, I learned better and I won’t forget the structures. I think my writing developed a lot.” (H3)

“It was very motivating experience. I tried to solve my peer’s grammatical problems. I liked this method of writing.” (H9)

“When I saw my friend learned something from me, I really enjoyed. I felt power and self-confidence. I think I can be a good teacher.” (H10)

“Certainly yes, because I feel I enjoy when I am more powerful and successful than my friend in a group. I mean, I get motivated to learn more.” (H14)

On the other hand, the latter group with negative perceptions of pairing with lower-proficient peers expressed frustration and impatience, viewing such pairings as detrimental to their own language development. They felt burdened by the responsibility to support their peers, which raised concerns about their own progress. Overall, they believed that these pairings limited their opportunities for challenging interactions and inhibited their language growth. Some of the views were randomly selected as follows:

“Actually, if I want to be honest, the class was boring for me. I think I didn’t learn enough because my friend took more time of me. I just explained to her everything. No, I don’t prefer this method.” (H2)

“You know, it is not fair because it isn’t my responsibility to help my friend. She didn’t cooperate with me, and I wrote everything. I prefer to work alone.” (H5)

“No, I don’t prefer this method because I think I just helped her, and I couldn’t ask my questions from my teacher. We couldn’t discuss about the topics. She used Turkish instead of English. Her writing was very weak. Oh, I was frustrated....” (H7)

“Not at all. I couldn’t improve my writing because I just corrected her errors. I liked to have challenging activities and discussions, I like to do activities, but” (H12)

4.5. Low-Proficient EFL Learners’ Attitudes toward their Collaboration in Heterogeneous H-L pairing

Low-proficient learners exhibited both positive (57%) and negative (43%) attitudes towards improving collaboration in H-L heterogeneous pairs. The ones who felt positive about this pairing, in line with what previous researchers (Kian-sam, 1999; Poole, 2008; Smieja, 2012; Tutty & Klein, 2008; Venkatakrishnan & Wiliam, 2003; Zamani, 2016) agreed on, believed that they received support and guidance from their high-proficient peers. Low-proficient learners valued the opportunity to learn from their higher-proficient peers in H-L heterogeneous pairs, feeling motivated to improve their language skills. They appreciated the effective feedback and support received, which contributed to their English proficiency. Additionally, they recognized that modeling their higher-proficient peers’ language use helped them learn new structures. Some views were randomly selected as follows:

"It was a good experience because my smart friend guided me very much and I learned from her. She told me my mistakes and I tried to learn from her." (L1)

"In this class I find a good English friend. She was like a teacher and I write what she writes. I learned a lot grammar in writing. And I learned many words. Thank you my dear friend..." (L6)

"Yes. I like this class because I learn writing with a good friend and I don't stress in the class. My friend help me to learn better." (L7)

"Oh yes, because Mona helped me a lot. She corrected my wrong words and explained to me. and I bought her a gift for her birthday." (L11)

However, a number of other low-proficient learners in H-L heterogeneous pairs expressed negative feelings of inadequacy and lack of confidence. They felt pressure to perform at the level of their higher-proficient peers. They experienced anxiety and stress leading to a negative attitude towards collaborative language practice. In addition, some low-proficient EFL learners experienced frustration and discouragement when facing communication challenges in H-L heterogeneous pairs.

"I want to tell you that I was shy from my friend. I tried to write with her but I couldn't. I was very stressed. Oh shit... I don't like it." (L3)

"No please. Because my friend laughing and told me to write English with her about the topics. I don't know. I didn't help her to write the sentences because my English is weak. She didn't understand me." (L4)

"I'm sorry but I couldn't work with my peer. She sometimes was angry with me and I was very sorry. Sometimes I didn't want to go to class but my mother told you should go....." (L9)

"No no. I was very alone because my friend was very pride and angry and bad" (L13)

In the end, it must be noted that research is scarce in the literature about high- and low-proficiency learners' attitudes toward homogeneous and heterogeneous grouping. Thus, a precise comparison of the qualitative findings of this research with the previous literature was not possible.

5. Theoretical and Pedagogical Implications

Referring to the thematic analyses and interpretations of the collected data and in line with the previous research (Adodo & Agbayewa, 2011; Baer, 2003; Kian-sam, 1999; Poole, 2008; Smieja, 2012; Tutty & Klein, 2008; Venkatakrishnan & Wiliam, 2003; Zamani, 2016), the following implications can be outlined:

5.1. Social Identity Theory

- Confirming social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), high- and low-proficient learners' positive attitudes toward homogeneous pairing aligns with the idea that individuals experience a sense of belonging and connection when they can relate to others based on shared characteristics, in this case, language proficiency.

- Furthermore, some of the high-proficient learners' negative attitudes toward H-L pairing can again confirm social identity theory, suggesting that individuals strive to maintain a positive social identity by favoring their in-group over out-groups.

5.2. *Social Cognitive Theories of Motivation*

- In the context of H-L pairing, low-proficient learners' positive attitudes towards H-L pairing can be linked to their higher degrees of motivation and confidence when working with higher-proficient partners, as they may perceive the partnership as an opportunity for learning and improvement. This aligns with social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1989), which emphasizes the role of self-efficacy and outcome expectations in shaping individuals' attitudes and behaviors.
- On the other hand, high-proficient learners may perceive the less proficient learners as part of an out-group due to their lower language proficiency, leading to negative attitudes and reluctance to engage in collaborative activities. This can result in decreased motivation and cooperation, hindering the potential benefits of the pairing.

5.3. *Intergroup Contact Theory*

- According to the intergroup contact theory (Allport, 1954), positive interactions between members of different abilities can reduce prejudice and improve intergroup relations. In this case, low-proficient learners may develop positive attitudes towards higher-proficient partners through the experience of successful collaboration and mutual support, leading to improved intergroup relations within the language learning context.

5.4. *Collaborative Learning Theory*

- In line with collaborative writing theory (Bruffee, 1973), both high- and low-proficiency learners preferred homogeneous pairings, suggesting that comfort and familiarity with peers can enhance engagement and writing effectiveness.
- The effectiveness of homogeneous pairings suggests that collaborative writing theories should consider proficiency levels when forming groups, advocating for structures that allow learners of similar abilities to work together to maximize learning potential.
- While both groups favored homogeneous pairings, the preference of low-proficiency learners for heterogeneous pairings indicates potential benefits to mixed-ability collaborations. This complexity suggests that collaborative writing theories should address the dynamic roles that different pairing types can play in the learning process, lending validity to varied, flexible grouping strategies.

5.5. *Self-Determination Theory (SDT)*

- The preference for working with similar peers suggests that EFL learners may feel a greater sense of relatedness and social support in homogeneous pairings. In line with SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985), feeling connected to others is crucial for motivation; therefore, creating opportunities for learners to build strong relationships within their groups can enhance their writing experience and foster a collaborative learning culture.
- While learners favor homogeneous pairings, the preference of low-proficiency learners for heterogeneous configurations indicates a need for a balance between structure and freedom. According to SDT, providing a supportive structure can lead to greater motivation when paired with opportunities for

choice. Therefore, educators should design collaborative writing tasks that allow for both types of pairings, fostering a sense of control while still providing needed support.

5.6. Threat to Social Identity

- Some of the low-proficient learners' negative attitudes toward H-L pairing may be because they feel a threat to their social identity when working with higher-proficient partners, leading to negative attitudes towards the heterogeneous pairing. Further, low-proficient learners may feel inferior or disadvantaged in comparison to their higher-proficient partners, leading to negative attitudes and resistance towards the partnership.

5.7. Self-Efficacy Beliefs

- The negative attitudes towards H-L pairing could also be linked to self-efficacy beliefs and comparison processes. Low-proficient learners may experience lower self-efficacy and feelings of inadequacy when working with higher-proficient partners, especially if they perceive a large gap in language proficiency. This may lead to negative attitudes and reluctance to engage in collaborative activities.

- Furthermore, Low-proficient learners may feel that working with higher-proficient partners limits their independence and opportunities to demonstrate their own language skills, leading to negative attitudes towards the partnership.

- On the other hand, high-proficient learners might have some positive attitudes toward H-L pairing due to the potential for fulfilling a leadership role and obtaining a sense of status and self-esteem from their role as helpers and mentors to their low-proficient peers.

In sum, due to the high proportion of negative attitudes toward heterogeneous pairing among high-proficiency learners and lack of a significant decisive positive attitude among low proficiency learners, heterogeneous pairing cannot be recommended as an effective strategy for boosting educational outcomes, more specifically, EFL writing development. Thus, for both high- and low-proficiency learners homogenous pairing or grouping is recommended in collaborative writing tasks.

Therefore, teacher training programs should focus on equipping educators with strategies for effectively implementing pairing arrangements customized to students' proficiency levels. Training can address how to balance collaboration in the classroom, emphasizing the benefits of both homogeneous and heterogeneous pairings. Educators should be trained to create supportive environments that foster peer interaction and mutual learning, enhancing learners' engagement and outcomes. Furthermore, curriculum designers should incorporate insights from this study into collaborative writing modules by providing structured opportunities for both homogeneous and heterogeneous collaborations, enabling students to benefit from the strengths of each pairing type.

6. Conclusion, Limitations, and Suggestions for Further Research

This study examined Iranian high- and low-proficiency EFL learners' attitudes toward homogeneous (i.e., H-H & L-L) and heterogeneous (i.e., H-L) pairing types in collaborative writing activities. The findings revealed that both high (95% > 28%) and low (64% > 57%) proficiency EFL learners perceived homogenous pairing more interesting and effective than heterogeneous pairing. In addition, heterogeneous pairing is more preferred by low-proficiency learners than high-proficiency ones (57% > 28%).

This study has several limitations that impact its generalizability and findings. Firstly, the homogeneity of the sample, consisting exclusively of Iranian female EFL learners, restricts the

applicability of the results to broader populations, as attitudes towards collaborative learning may vary among different demographics. Additionally, the relatively small sample size of 72 participants and the specific educational context in Iran may limit the findings' relevance in diverse settings. The focus on written attitudes also constrains the scope, overlooking other language skills and broader educational outcomes. Furthermore, potential response bias during semi-structured interviews could influence the authenticity of the reported attitudes.

For further research, it is recommended to explore EFL learners' attitudes and collaborative dynamics in mixed-gender and multicultural classrooms to understand how these factors influence student interactions and preferences for pairing types. Additionally, investigating the impact of collaboration on other language skills, such as speaking, as well as expanding the group sizes to include collaborations in groups of more than two, could provide deeper insights into the effectiveness of collaborative learning. Including average-proficiency learners in future studies would also enhance understanding of diverse learner dynamics.

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Appendix A

IELTS General Writing Tasks' Topics

WRITING TASK 2

You should spend about 50 minutes on this task.

Write about the following topic:

Collaborative writing task 1: Nowadays, more and more college students start to use cell phones in class. Some people argue that college students should not be allowed to bring cell phones to class. However, others disagree. What is your opinion on this issue? Work with your partner to write an essay on this issue.

Collaborative writing task 2: Nowadays, many college graduates rely on their parents for financial support. Some people think college graduates should not rely on their parents financially. However, others disagree. What is your opinion on this issue? Work with your partner to write an essay on this issue.

Collaborative writing task 3: Exams are an important part of education in many countries. Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of exams and give your opinion about the role exams should play in education systems. Work with your partner to write an essay on this issue.

Collaborative writing task 4: Some people feel online courses are better while others feel classroom courses are good. Discuss both the views and give your opinion. Work with your partner to write an essay on this issue.

Collaborative writing task 5: Some people believe that teaching children at home is best for a child's development while others think that it is important for children to go to school. Discuss the advantages of both methods and give your own opinion. Give reasons for your answer and include any relevant examples from your own knowledge or experience. Work with your partner to write an essay on this issue.

Collaborative writing task 6: In Britain, when someone gets old they often go to live in a home with other old people where there are nurses to look after them. Sometimes the government has to pay for this care. Who do you think should pay for this care, the government or the family? Give reasons for your answer

and include any relevant examples from your own knowledge or experience. Work with your partner to write an essay on this issue.

Collaborative writing task 7: Nowadays, children watch a lot of TV and play video games. However, some think that these activities are not beneficial for a child's mental health. To what extent do you agree or disagree? Work with your partner to write an essay on this issue.

Collaborative writing task 8: Modern technology now allows rapid and uncontrolled access to information in many countries. This is a danger to our societies. To what extent do you agree or disagree? Work with your partner to write an essay on this issue.

Collaborative writing task 9: Doctors recommend that older people exercise regularly. However, many of them do not get enough exercise. What are the reasons? What can be done to encourage them to exercise more? Work with your partner to write an essay on this issue.

Collaborative writing task 10: Many people believe that film is a less important art than other forms such as literature and painting. To what extent do you agree or disagree? Work with your partner to write an essay on this issue.

Collaborative writing task 11: In some places, young people find it difficult to communicate with older people. Why is this? What are the solutions? Work with your partner to write an essay on this issue.

Collaborative writing task 12: Many parents put a lot of pressure on their children to succeed. To what extent do you agree? Work with your partner to write an essay on this issue.

Collaborative writing task 13: **In cities and towns all over the world the high volume of traffic is a problem. What are the causes of this and what actions can be taken to solve this problem?** Work with your partner to write an essay on this issue.

Collaborative writing task 14: **Some people think that the teenage years are the happiest times of most people's lives. Others think that adult life brings more happiness, in spite of greater responsibilities. Discuss both these views and give your own opinion.** Work with your partner to write an essay on this issue.

Collaborative writing task 15: Some people say that music is a good way of bringing people of different cultures and ages together. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this opinion? Work with your partner to write an essay on this issue.

Appendix B

Attitude Interview items (Ghanbari & Abdolrezapour, 2020)

Answer the following questions.

1. How do you think of cooperative learning in your group?
2. Did you face any problems when cooperating with other members?
3. Can you describe your feeling about cooperative activities in your group?
4. How do you think of your group mates?
5. Do you prefer to be in the same group for the rest of your cooperative activities?