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Revista de Antropología, Ciencias de la Comunicación y de la Información, Filosofía,
Linguística y Semiótica, Problemas del Desarrollo, la Ciencia y la Tecnología

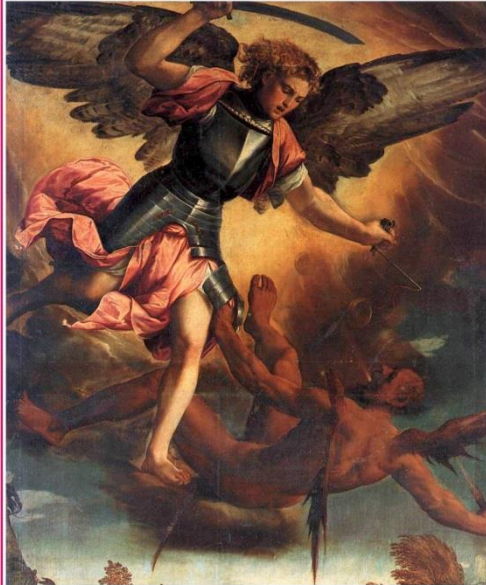
Año 35, 2019, Especial N°

20

Revista de Ciencias Humanas y Sociales

ISSN 1012-1587/ ISSNe: 2477-9385

Depósito Legal pp 198402ZU45



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Effectiveness of Collaborative Learning as a Strategy in the Teaching of EFL

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Abstract

This paper explored the effectiveness of collaborative learning in EFL classrooms of Saudi Tertiary Education Institutions. The paper used a questionnaire and interviews to elicit quantitative and qualitative data from 40 purposefully selects EFL teachers and learners. The respondents shared their perceptions about how collaborative learning impacted the current pedagogical practices in Qassim University. The study findings highlighted that teachers and students perceived collaborative learning positively in Qassim University. In conclusion, the study found that both students and teachers considered it as the best approach for the learning of a foreign language.

Keywords: Collaborative Learning, Classroom Teaching, EFL.

Eficacia del aprendizaje colaborativo como estrategia en la enseñanza de la EFL

Resumen

Este documento exploró la efectividad del aprendizaje colaborativo en las aulas de EFL de las instituciones de educación terciaria sauditas. El documento utilizó un cuestionario y entrevistas para obtener datos cuantitativos y cualitativos de 40 maestros y alumnos de EFL seleccionados a propósito. Los encuestados compartieron sus percepciones sobre cómo el aprendizaje colaborativo impactó las prácticas pedagógicas actuales en la Universidad de Qassim. Los hallazgos del estudio destacaron que los docentes y los estudiantes percibieron el aprendizaje colaborativo positivamente en la Universidad de Qassim. En conclusión, el estudio encontró que tanto los estudiantes como los maestros lo consideraron como el mejor enfoque para el aprendizaje de una lengua extranjera.

Palabras clave: aprendizaje colaborativo, enseñanza en el aula, EFL.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the early stages of its inception, EFL teachers in Saudi classrooms interpreted Collaborative Learning as Group Learning, with these groups sometimes being as large as half the total number of learners. Communication was mostly limited to teacher-student and the teacher was still at the center of the process. It was noted with much dismay that with teachers focusing more diligently than ever on

imparting theoretical knowledge, learner performance dropped rather than picking up in this scenario. As the semesters and sessions moved on, newer insights came with in-service teacher training programs. For instance, Alfallaj (2016) emphasizes on the role of the teachers and the importance of given the appropriate training, so that they have the ability to enrich their students with effective communication skills and a rich corpus of relevant knowledge in functional English.

It was realized that for collaborative learning to yield optimum results, the change was needed at the philosophical level. Fareh (2010) evaluated research results with 122 different group sizes in collaborative learning. He points out that only with groups of up to four there is any remarkable percentile gain. As the group size moves to five and more, the gain is in negative. Further, at least four collaborative communication channels need to be present for collaborative learning to succeed. These are teacher-student, student-student, with parents, and between the teacher and other staff members.

2. RESEARCH PROBLEM

Collaborative Learning is actually a philosophy of language learning whose aim is acculturation of the learners into the wider world of the target language and culture. In this sense, social constructivism is the foundation of CL with little emphasis on teaching technique and pedagogy. In a collaborative classroom, interaction

plays a pivotal role in nurturing higher order thinking skills, such as applying ideas and raising questions and not merely reporting, whether facts, experiences or procedures. Here the teacher is a catalyst starting a chain of activities for the learners. There are wide opportunities available to the learners to work collaboratively to learn, develop concepts and discuss ideas. This also means that learners are actively involved in the classroom process and on the way, master social skills. Collaboration is reflected in projects and assignments.

3. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Lecture method bordering on the communicative approach has failed to lead the Saudi youngsters to any speak-able success in the job market. Cooperation and collaboration are paramount skills in this arena. The classical example is of a typical job interview where candidates are given a problem to solve. They are asked if they prefer to work alone in a cubicle or in a group to find a solution. What these candidates do not know is that if they go for the cubicle, they would be out rightly rejected.

4. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The stated objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To assess the effectiveness of collaborative learning as a strategy of teaching.
2. To analyze the views of teachers and students of English on the efficacy of collaborative learning in EFL classrooms.
3. To propose strategies of collaborative learning that could be of use by teachers in colleges of Sciences and Arts departments of English all over the kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

5. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following questions were laid out at the start of the study to propose strategies of collaborative learning that could be of use to teachers in colleges of Sciences and Arts departments of English all over the kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

1. How do teachers and students perceive collaborative learning at the tertiary level in Qassim University?
2. How effective is collaborative learning as an approach to the teaching of English as a foreign language?
3. Can collaborative learning more effective as a strategy of teaching and learning of EFL in an Arab context?

6. LITERATURE REVIEW

An educational approach to learning and teaching which involves learner's groups working together to resolve the issues, finish the task or build a product is termed as Collaborative learning. It indicates an instructional process where the learners at different levels perform a task uniquely to attain the common aim. As Alahdal and Alhattami (2014) explain, it is the sharing of each other experience, information and expertise with the synergic effort with happier and better results in implementation/ execution of activities. This cooperative learning practice enhances the problem-solving approaches of students. In general, the peer-support system can help the learners internalize critical thinking as well as the external knowledge skills and help them to use it as a tool for intellectual functioning. In spite of these advantages, it is still a question of how teachers and students perceive collaborative learning (Kenan, 2018; Smrcka & Camska, 2016).

The study revealed that using chat, there is a significant increase in the amount of language production of learners and its difficulty. The literature showed moderate support argued that the technology has improved the interaction and output, metalinguistic knowledge, motivation and effect, and feedback of the learners. Bedel (2016) studied the need for the literature circles that support collaborative learning in the EFL classroom for achieving higher levels of literary and language skills. Espina et al. (2017) examined the advantageous of Collaborative Action Research (CAR) in developing speaking skills in

the Chilean EFL classrooms. The findings revealed that the practices received from the group interviews motivate the interaction and participation of the student at classes. The collaboration between the peers made everyone to identify the strengths and enhance the weakness while teaching.

Huang et al. (2012) investigated the effect of employing collaborative learning from a dialogical and social point of view on the seventh graders' collaboration in the EFL classroom at a public school in Bogotá, Colombia. The findings revealed that performing a serious approach towards language education and accepting collaborative learning as the social structure of knowledge might light the chances to modify the conventional learning and teaching practices in which both students and teachers have a distinct role, so the stabilizing the classroom interaction and relation between the participants and also endorsing the empowerment of the students.

7. METHODOLOGY

This study was based on an exploratory research design. It was used to examine the experience, social constructs and perceptions of the EFL learners and teachers at Qassim University. Using an interpretive approach lets them communicate with respondents in their workplace and identify their perception regarding the phenomenon of research. The study used both qualitative and quantitative methods for collecting data to gain global knowledge about the focused

phenomenon. In this aspect, the present paper used both survey and interview method. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore the teacher's perception of the collaborative learning effect. A further quantitative method was adopted to understand the effectiveness of the method from the learners' point of view. The purposive sampling strategy was used to access the qualified teachers and students in EFL classrooms (Indriastuti, 2019; Parvizian et al., 2015).

Before moving on to a discussion of the results, the researcher would like to share some of his personal experiences. It was noted that learners worked far more actively and diligently in the collaborative environment than was ever noted in the classroom. Their problem-solving techniques were more insightful and inclusive of all members of the group. The otherwise poor achievers exhibited greater ingenuity in this environment, and this was also reflected in their exam grades. The learners who were reticent in the classroom contributed greatly to a group effort. Language production at individual level showed much improvement during the experiment. Finally, throughout the experiment, motivation was high among the learners and they looked happy and excited coming to the EFL classroom as opposed to their previous morose and disinterested attitude.

8. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

	Frequency	Percentage
Undergraduate	40	100
Total	40	100

Table 1: Grade level

The above table mentions the grades of students who participated in this research. All the students were undergraduates in the age group of 17-19 years, all were males, and had at least six years of formal EFL education behind them.

	Frequency	Percentage
Less than one semester	40	100
Total	40	100

Table 2: How long have you been taught by using cooperative learning

Marks	Frequency	Percentage
0-49	29	72.5
50-64	7	17.5
65-70	4	10
Total	40	100

Table 3: Previous year's performance

As is evident, a large number of learners fell in the poor performer category of 0-49 marks. In terms of percentage, these were 72.5% of the entire group. Following this, 17.5% of them got 50-64 marks, and lastly, only 10% of them managed between 65-70 marks. In other words, a major section did poorly in their exams.

Question	Response	Frequency	Percentage
I like the English that is taught by using cooperative learning	Strongly Agree	22	55
	Agree	16	40
	Not Sure	2	5
	Total	40	100
I prefer to be taught by cooperative learning compared to traditional methods such as lecture-style	Strongly Agree	34	85%
	Agree	6	15%
	Total	40	100
I think it is possible to learn English with cooperative learning	Strongly Agree	29	72.50%
	Agree	6	15%
	Not Sure	1	2.50%
	Disagree	2	5%
	Strongly Disagree	2	5%
	Total	40	100
I like cooperative learning in the classroom	Strongly Agree	35	87.50%
	Agree	5	12.50%
	Total	40	100
The assessment in the EFL classroom is fair and appropriate for cooperative learning activities	Strongly Agree	4	10%
	Agree	3	7.50%
	Not Sure	19	47.50%
	Disagree	8	20%
	Strongly Disagree	6	15%
	Total	40	100
I felt the way that the EFL teachers split the students into groups is appropriate	Strongly Agree	24	60%
	Agree	11	27.50%

	Not Sure	5	12.50%
The materials provided by teachers are more useful in cooperative learning practices	Strongly Agree	38	95.00%
	Agree	2	5.00%
	Total	40	100

Table 4: Perception of students towards Cooperative Learning

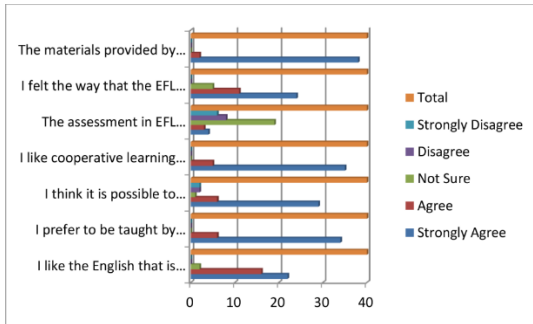


Figure 1: Perception of students towards Cooperative Learning

As per Table 4 represented in Figure 1, a sizeable portion of the population ie 55% like English to be taught using the Collaborative approach. This finding is corroborated by the response to the next question to which an even larger number (85%) opine that this approach is preferable to the conventional approach of lecturing. For many reasons, but mainly administrative, collaborative approach has not found much favor with the teacher community in Saudi Arabia. Moreover, dynamics in a foreign language classroom are also peculiar which further adds to their disinclination to use this approach. But this perception of the teachers is countered by the response of the participants to the next question: 72.50% of them reported that they felt English could be learned by collaboration as in the conventional set up, only a few good learners got the opportunity to participate in

the class process while the less proficient learners felt shy of speaking up or were apprehensive of being laughed at if they made a mistake. This fact is also supported by the teachers who informally agreed that class participation is rather minimal in the lecture method. In the current study, the researcher was conscious of forming small groups for the tasks as previous experience with group activities showed that in large groups learning outcomes are negligible as the groups tended to be dominated by one or two active participants who completely edged out the poor learners. This added to the demotivation of a majority of the group. In our environment, 60% of the participants were satisfied with the splitting of the class into small groups and it was seen that even beyond official study hours, the learners interacted actively within the group, even clarifying doubts they have had in previous sections of the syllabus that was completed in a conventional manner.

		Frequency	Percentage
Overall Effectiveness	Strongly Agree	15	37.50%
	Agree	14	35.00%
	Not Sure	8	20.00%
	Disagree	2	5.00%
	Strongly Disagree	1	2.50%
Higher my achievement test scores	Strongly Agree	27	67.50%
	Agree	8	20.00%
	Not Sure	3	7.50%
	Disagree	2	5.00%
Motivate me to be an autonomous leader	Strongly Agree	11	27.50%
	Agree	17	42.50%

	Not Sure	9	22.50%
	Disagree	2	5.00%
	Strongly Disagree	1	2.50%
Thinking skills	Strongly Agree	22	55.00%
	Agree	18	45.00%
Higher my learning motivation	Strongly Agree	31	77.50%
	Agree	9	22.50%
Increase my focus on a task	Strongly Agree	12	30.00%
	Agree	16	40.00%
	Not Sure	3	7.50%
	Disagree	5	12.50%
	Strongly Disagree	4	10.00%
Problem-solving skills	Strongly Agree	34	85.00%
	Agree	6	15.00%

Table 5: Effect of collaborative learning

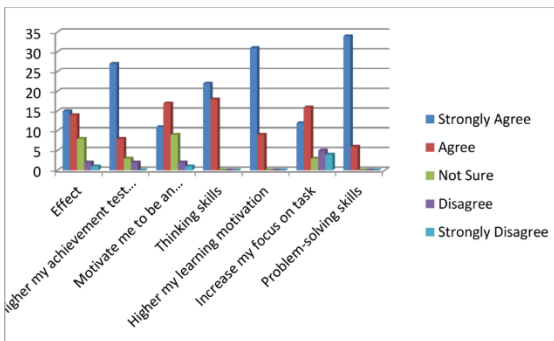


Figure 2: Effect of collaborative learning

Table 5 represented in Figure 2 demonstrate the effects of collaborative learning as an approach to the teaching of English as a foreign language. As per the findings, students think that collaborative learning increased their achievement test scores (67.50%), 27.50%

opined that it motivated them to be autonomous leaders, 55% felt it increased their thinking skills, 77.50% felt that the approach enhanced the learning motivation, 40% of them agreed that collaborative learning increased the student's focus on the tasks and, 85% of them felt it was helpful for the development of problem-solving skills. In line with our findings, many previous studies have stated the importance of collaborative learning for students. According to Gokhale (1995), collaborative learning gives the students to opportunity to evaluate, analyze, and synthesize ideas communally. The group interactions in this learning assist the students to obtain other's experiences, scholarship, and skills.

Imai (2010) stated that a collaborative group helped to reach a new understanding of an unfamiliar SLA concept in Japanese university students. Kuo et al. (2014) explored the influence of different learning style-based grouping approaches especially collaborative learning for students who are grouped with the different and same learning styles to examine the impact. Jabeen & Thomas (2015) analyzed the students' learning trends in online language courses and evaluate efficiency. The findings of the study showed that classroom atmosphere rather than an online environment was more suitable for English learning. Balci (2017) also examined the impact of activities based on learning-style on the reading comprehension skills and self-efficacy insights of the students in English as a foreign language classes. The study declared that the learning-style based activities improved the English self-efficacy insights and reading comprehension skills of the learners.

9. CONCLUSION

From the findings, it is concluded that there is a positive impact of collaborative learning on the teaching of English as a foreign language. Moreover, students and teacher's perceive collaborative learning positively since it provides several benefits to both. The approach definitely reduces the pressure of learning and fosters collaborative relations among learners, which can find an extension in real life situations as they move from academic environments to work and professional environments. Teachers too feel they are doing justice to their job if real-life learning takes place. In any case, with the advent of technology into education, teachers understand that they now have to play the role of facilitators to their learners. However, the demands of conventional syllabi cannot be denied.

Therefore, the need of the hour is a complete overhauling of the EFL situation in Saudi Arabia as stresses out teachers cannot possibly be expected to turn out learners who have the potential to succeed. In other words, policy changes at the grassroots level are needed, curriculum to be seriously reviewed, learner needs to be assessed, teachers trained and retrained, and useful materials to be developed. It is an uphill task, but certainly not an impossible one.

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**UNIVERSIDAD
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opción

Revista de Ciencias Humanas y Sociales

Año 35, N° 20, (2019)

Esta revista fue editada en formato digital por el personal de la Oficina de Publicaciones Científicas de la Facultad Experimental de Ciencias, Universidad del Zulia.

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