ممارسات التعليم التعاوني: المزايا والتحديات من وجهة نظر طلبة الدراسات الأولية من العراقيين متعلمي اللغة الأنكليزية كلغة أجنبية

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المستخلص :

يتلقى التعلم التعاوني دعوة قوية في المؤسسات التعليمية على مدار العشرين عامًا الماضية. تحول هذه الأداة التربوية ذات الطراز الغربي بشكل كبير تركيز الاهتمام من طرق التدريس التي تركز على المعلم إلى نهج التعلم المتمركز حول المتعلم. الفئة المستهدفة لهذه الدراسة هم طلبة المرحلة الثالثة في قسم اللغة الأنكليزية في كلية الإمام الكاظم الجامعة. شارك الطلبة في دورة تدريبية مكثفة طويلة الأمد حول التعليم التعاوني. سعت هذه الدراسة إلى التحقق من مواقفهم لاستكشاف فوائدها ، إن وجدت ، وكذلك القيود التي قد تعوق تنفيذها الناجح. تم اعتماد منهجية بحث مختلطة ولتعزيز مصداقية وصلاحية نتائج هذه الدراسة ، تم استخدام مجموعتين من البيانات: استبيان ومقابلة. جمعت النتائج التي تم الحصول عليها من تحليلاتهم في قسم النتائج للأجابة على أسئلة البحث. بينت النتائج أن الغالبية العظمى من المشاركين أفادوا أن تبني التعليم التعاوني ولّد مواقف إيجابية عندهم. ومع ذلك ، كانت النتائج متنوعة. أعلن عدد قليل من المشاركين تحفظاتهم تجاه التعليم التعاوني. نوقشت النتائج فيما يتعلق بالجانب النظري ذات الصلة، وقد انتهت الدراسة بخاتمة.

الكلمات المفتاحية : نظرية التعلم الثقافية الأجتماعية ، مكونات التعليم التعاوني، وجهات نظر الطلبة، مهارات التفكير الناقد، مهارات التواصل مع الاخرين

Collaborative Learning Practices: Benefits and Challenges as Perceived by Iraqi EFL Undergraduates

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Abstract

Collaborative learning (henceforth, CL) receives strong advocacy in educational circles over the last 20 years. This western-style pedagogical instrument dramatically shifts the focus of interest from teacher-centered teaching methods to a learner-centered learning approach. Third-year EFL students at Imam Al-Kadhum University College were the target population of this study. They participated in a term-long CL-based intensive training course. This study sought to investigate their attitudes to explore its benefits, if any, and also the constraints that might impede its successful implementation. A mixed research methodology was adopted. To enhance the credibility and validity of the outcomes of this study, two data sets were used. They were a questionnaire and interview. The results obtained from their analyses were combined together in the findings section to address the two research questions. They revealed that a massive majority of the participants reported that CL intervention generated positive attitudes in them. However, the findings were mixed. Few participants declared their reservations toward CL. The findings were discussed with the relevant literature. The study closes with a conclusion.

Keywords: Socio-cultural theory of learning; CL components; Students' attitudes; Student-student learning; Critical thinking skills; Interpersonal communication skills

1. Introduction: Terminology of CL and What Counts for its Success

Various definitions of CL are found in the relevant literature. One most common definition is that it stands for "an instruction method in which students at various performance levels work together in small groups towards a common academic goal" (Gokhale, 1995: p.22). CL has predominantly grown and gained its popularity as being one of the most effective and beneficial pedagogical instruments over the last 20 years worldwide. It has positive impacts on students' learning quality as well as their achievements in diverse learning settings (Shehadeh, 2011). Johnsons and Johnson (2009) assert that CL experience, in comparison to lecture-style and teacher-controlled classrooms, helps produce:

(a) higher achievement and greater productivity;
(b) more caring, supportive, and committed relationships; and
(c) greater psychological relief, social competence, and self-esteem.

However, grouping or pairing learners are not necessarily supportive of CL. For a group activity to be considered successfully collaborative, five criteria must be properly taught, enforced, and implemented (Johnson and Johnson, 1999, pp.75-88). They are positive interdependence, promotive interaction, individual accountability, interpersonal social skills, and group processing. To make sure that the first condition occurs, all group members must realize that “each learner is responsible for his own learning, and is motivated to enhance the learning of others" (Olsen & Kagan, 1992, p.8). Learners need to understand that every member's effort is indispensable for one's learning and others in that each member's success in learning is still an insufficient condition for a successful achievement of the group learning goal unless all members learn together (Johnson & Johnson, 1994).

The second critical condition of successful collaboration is promotive interaction. Johnson and Johnson (1990) assert that this condition is characterized by providing each other students with the assistance and guidance when needed; providing constructive feedback to group members; sharing needed resources; and debating other’s conclusions and reasoning in order to promote a better understanding of the task at hand. Doing so lets them work constructively together to reach the group learning target (Johnson & Johnson, 2017).

The third key condition for productive CL is individual accountability. It takes place whereby all learners in a group are held accountable for doing their share of the group work. Each member has a personal responsibility for completing one’s share of work and also providing timely feedback, support, and guidance especially to those who need more assistance to complete the parts of the assignment that are just above their present mental capabilities “the success of one student helps other students to be successful” (Gokhale, 1995: p.1), so that all group members can learn together.

The fourth key condition is the interpersonal social skills. An essential prerequisite to make this condition possible is to teach and train group members to learn and practice social skills that

facilitate their high-quality interactions during the group discussion. The skills include (Gilles, 2016: p.42):

- actively listening to each other;
- sharing ideas and resources;
- commenting constructively on others' ideas;
- accepting responsibility for one's behavior; and
- making democratic decisions to manage disagreement in ideas and solutions.

Learners must be motivated to use these skills not only to enhance group members' accountability to maintain group cohesion but also to help them and others learn so that they can accomplish mutual learning gains (Johnson & Johnson, 2009).

The final key component of successful collaborative learning is group processing. Group processing is directed to periodically reflect on the progress of group members' achievement. It involves them in identifying which successful behavior that each member did and which one can be improved to gain better future outcomes (Johnson and Johnson, 2009). Questions such as the following are often used to stimulate this type of reflection (Gilles, 2016: p.42):

- What have we achieved?
- What do we still need to achieve?
- How might we do this?

According to Johnson and Johnson's (2017: p.4) words: "Such processing enables learning groups to focus on group maintenance, facilitates the learning of social skills, ensures that members receive feedback on their participation, and reminds students to practice the small group skills required to work cooperatively".

1.1 Benefits of CL

CL-based classroom activities offer students opportunities on more challenging learning tasks "Rather than beginning with facts and ideas and then moving to applications, collaborative learning activities usually begin with problems, for which students must gather real solutions, facts and ideas" (Perdes, 2016: p. 337). CL has been successfully implemented to solve problems in mathematics (Webb and Farivar, 1994), promote learning achievement in collaborative writing (Dale,1995), comprehension in reading (Stevens and Slalvin, 1995), and conceptual understanding in science (Lazarowitz &Karsenty, 1990). Proponents of CL claim that it is found to:

- provide more language practice opportunities (Long & Porter,1985);
- improve the quality of students talk (Ohato, 2000);

- create a supportive, and exploratory learning environment (Long & Porter,1985);
- promote social interaction skills (Lin.2015);
- encourage students' responsibility for learning (Olsen & Kagan, 1992);
- stimulate thinking through discussion and debate (Lin.2015); and
- build self-esteem in students as well as self-confidence (Slavin, 1995).

2. Theoretical Underpinning: Social Constructivism

This study is fundamentally guided by the theoretical tenets of Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivist theory of learning and human cognitive development, popularly known as Sociocultural Theory (SCT). A key premise of his theory is that higher-order human mental functions such as thinking, language, reasoning, and problem-solving processes are not located in the mind of the individual as inborn biological capacity. Rather, they are learned, developed, and enriched only in and out of social interaction between individuals engaged in a goal-directed activity occurring in a socio-culturally situated environment (Donato & McCormick, 1994). Interaction is mediated through symbolic and physical instruments, language being the most dynamic vehicle among them, with other interlocutors (Wertsch, 1993).

CL in a Vygotskyan tradition aims at social interaction occurring between students and the teacher or among students themselves, which supports them to move to an advanced mental growth level through Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Lin, 2015). Vygotsky (1978: p.86) defines it as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers".

3. The Structure of CL Intervention

CL intervention involved three stages

Stage 1: Incorporating socio-scientific topics into CL

In the context of this study, genetically modified (GM) foods issue was adopted as teaching material. Such selection is based on two reasons: First, the issue of whether or not it is permissible (Halal) in Islam to eat GM foods is personally relevant as it continues to generate debate among Muslim theologians and members of the public due to its controversies in the light of *Quran* teachings. Second, it helps foster the conditions necessary for group members' interest and engagement in discussion, reasoning, debating, and decision-making practices.

Stage 2: The Preparation

In weeks 1 and 2 with (4x50 minute) class periods, the teacher (the first researcher), introduced the participants to the five key positive features of CL that cultivate positive interdependence, individual accountability, interpersonal social skills, promotive interaction, and group negotiation and compromise for them to understand the mechanism of CL intervention. The goal was

to ensure that constructive rather than competitive collaborative dialogues would happen toward the overall group success.

The teacher selected a sample of 6 texts of the GM issue for the purpose of modeling. The teacher used them as mediating tools to scaffold the participants to develop awareness and the practice of the rhetorical stages and moves of argumentation and linguistic resources used to compose them.
To achieve this objective, the teacher, in weeks 3 and 4 with the total of (4x50 minute) class periods, used the 3 - obligatory moves as well as other optional ones proposed by Hyland (1990):

- establishing the writer's position on the issue in the introductory paragraph;
- substantiating his/her position with relevant details and facts in body paragraphs;
- establishing and rebutting an opposing claim; and
- restating the position the writer advocated in the concluding paragraph.

The teacher used graphic organizers to map out the rhetorical moves of those argumentative model texts. Group members were encouraged to have their share in exploring and practicing them. The teacher allowed group members to make use of the graphic organizers as guidelines during their collaboration to scaffold them on how to introduce their ideas and thoughts into logical patterns. Prior to CL intervention, the teacher made available many handouts for the group members to read in order for them to elaborate on their baseline content knowledge on GM foods topics. They were informed that their tasks were to collaboratively work, not only to formulate a persuasive argumentation with justification to support their own claims on GM foods topics but also to consider and respond to potential claims opposing theirs.

Stage 3: Classroom Procedures

The participants were assigned to groups of 5-6 members in each of the three classrooms (sections A, B, and C). They were purposively formed on a criterion-based selection with respect to their heterogeneous gender and English competence and achievement levels drawing on their achievements in previous exams.

The teacher selected think/pair/share CL technique (Crandall, 1999) to help create instructional practices conducive to maximum collaborative engagement. Group members were encouraged to work through dialogic exchanges at different stages of planning and developing ideas and thoughts, building on each other's ones, sharing them in pairs, and finally with the whole group. In every practice session, group members were stimulated to employ their reasoning skills to analyze and justify their own arguments, rebut potential counter-arguments, and offered alternative views to reach a thoughtful decision on GM foods under discussion.

The teacher played a key mediating role to promote collaborative discussions among group members in implementing CL experience in his class. His roles involve the following activities (Gillies, 2006):

- structuring the groups and the tasks so that students can understand what they are expected to do and how they behave;
- promoting dialogic exchanges among students to elicit responses;
- probing and clarifying issues;
    - asking questions to challenge students to provide reasons for their thinking and ideas;
    - offering tentative suggestion and assistance; and
    - acknowledging and validating students' contributions**.**

4. Statement of the Problem

This research study arose from the researchers' concern with the pitfalls inherited in the theoretical principles and pedagogical focus of current teaching methods at the university level. They are, according to the Second Baghdad National Seminar on Strategies and Curriculum Reform of the New Education System (2004, p.1), characterized by being "out-dated teaching methods, negative learning, and rote memorization without deep comprehension". The seminar made it explicit that current teaching/ learning methods are far from satisfying students' goals and needs in academia and workplaces in the modern world. The seminar thus stressed the need to adopt a Western- rooted instructional approach to empower them to be active partners and independent problem-solvers in the whole process of constructing knowledge drawing on gathering information from multiple perspectives rather than relying on memorizing ready-made one provided by the teacher. Indeed, "There is an upswing in demand by staff, students, and employers for students to graduate with good interpersonal skills, knowledge of group dynamics, the flexibility to work in teams, the ability to lead, to problem-solve and to communicate" (Ingleton, Doube & Rogers, 2000: p.2),.

The researchers believe, like Bruffee (1993) who argued that CL is more dynamic than individualistic /competitive learning as in traditional teaching methods. It helps create effective and meaningful learning opportunities that reinforce producing academically stronger students and more literate and self-directed agents in society in the future.

5. Objectives and Research Questions

There are various models and methods proposed to employ CL in the classroom. The one used in the context of this research study is called students "learning together" (Johnson & Johnson, 1997). It set out to achieve twofold objectives, the first being to access the attitudes of third-year EFL students toward the potential benefits, if anything, of the engagement in an intensive training course in CL. The second objective is to explore the attitudes of third-year EFL students towards the

causes of potential constraints that they may encounter when collaborating within a group. The reason for studying attitudes is based on the assumption that they exert significant influence on respondents' underlying dispositions of how much they like or dislike something and thus shape and guide their behavior (Dörnyei, 2001). The study was guided by the following two research questions:

1. How do Iraqi EFL third-year students perceive CL intervention?
2. How do Iraqi EFL third-year students perceive the challenges of engaging in CL?

6. Significance of the Study

This research study is significant in several ways. First, to the knowledge of the researchers, no study has been yet conducted to investigate Iraqi EFL students' attitudes on how far CL-based principles can be beneficial in developing their proficiency in English and improving their critical thinking skills. The study also seeks to explore their attitudes concerning the constraints that may impede its successful implementation. Second, the time is ideal for the present study as an attempt to respond to a national call explicitly declared by the seminar to seek an alternative teaching method to the current conventional ones. Therefore, it is an attempt to fill a pedagogical gap. Third, its key findings are hoped to provide teachers with useful theoretical and pedagogical insights to recognize the value of incorporating CL into their teaching practices. Fourth, its findings may encourage further research to enrich relevant teaching theory and classroom practices.

7. The Participants and Research Site

The total target population (N 140) of this research study was third-year students (21 to 23 years old) at the English Department enrolled in a four-year course leading to a BA in EFL and Literature at Imam Al-Kadhum University College (Al-Diwaniya Branch). They were purposively selected on the basis that they were contextually relevant and the researchers could reasonably expect them to have sufficient competence in English that would empower them to engage in collaborative classroom activities.

8. Research Methodology and Data Collection Tools

Within the context of this study, the researchers adopted a mixed-method approach to help answer the two research questions. Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, and Turner (2007, p.123) offer the following general definition of this method:

> [T]he type of research in which a researcher or team of researchers combines elements of qualitative and quantitative approaches (e.g., use of qualitative and quantitative viewpoints, data collection, analysis, inference techniques for the purpose of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration.

This methodology offers researchers the flexibility to look at a single research problem from the perspectives of two research methods with multiple sources of data. Perceived as such, it compensates for the non-overlapping weakness of one methodology through the strength of another (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

Questionnaire and semi-structured interviews were used to gather quantitative and qualitative data respectively to help answer the two research questions. The questionnaire is time and cost-efficient in that it is quicker and cheaper to administer and convenient for respondents (Bryman, 2008). The interview is considered one of the most popular instruments commonly associated with a qualitative research approach (Jarvinen, 2000). Second, it permits researchers to redirect or reword the questions as the interview progresses to elicit further information that helps explore the attitudes that might not be observed directly in the participants' responses to the questionnaire items (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1989).

Building on the quantitative findings emerging from the questionnaire, a qualitative research approach was conducted. The qualitative paradigm allows the first researcher, through the analysis of the interviewees' transcriptions to delve into the participants' experience of having CL to derive and interpret their own various personal attitudes under real-world conditions (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 20l0)

9. Procedures of Data Collection

9.1 The researchers gathered data at the end of an intensive training course in CL run by the first one over 10 weeks (2x50 minutes a week) of the first 14-week term of the academic year 2018-2019.

The researchers designed a questionnaire based on a review of relevant literature. It was composed of close-ended statements with a single issue in each one. They were rated on a Likert five-point scale of strongly agree, agree, neutral, strongly disagree, and disagree. Such a scale is widely used in educational research for measuring the attitudes of students (Airasian and Gay, 2000). A jury of three EAP Instructors at the Department of English reviewed the content of the statements to ensure their validity and relevance to the research questions before setting down on a final version. They were worded in simple English.

The questionnaire consists of two parts as shown in Appendix A. Part 1 (1-12) is composed of statements designed to gather data regarding the participants' attitudes towards the positive characteristics of CL. Part 2 (13-20) consists of statements utilized to access data concerning their attitudes towards potential causes of potential challenges that may impede successful collaboration.

The second and third researchers invited the participants to complete the questionnaire during a regular lesson session on December 23rd, 2018. They explained its purpose and discussed its items

with the participants in both Arabic and English to avoid any possible misinterpretation. Only 100 out of the total number (140) of students completed the questionnaires. However, though the sample size is small, "It is typical in qualitative research to study a few individuals or a few cases." (Creswell, 2005: p.73). Those who did respond were not included in the final sample. The

participants were randomly given numbers (S1-S100) to conceal their identities. They were instructed to tick the box that best corresponded to their attitudes.

9.2 The second and the third researchers administered a (2x45 minute) semi-structured interview in an informal setting in their office on December, 25th 2018. 25 students (out of the 100 ones) voluntarily took part in the interview. They were randomly given numbers (S1-S25) to conceal their identities. The two researchers developed two exploratory questions drawing on the findings obtained from their responses to the questionnaire. The questions were:

1. What was good about CL features that could render it into a useful and beneficial pedagogical instrument?
2. What were the causes of potential challenges that may impede EFL participants' successful collaboration within a group?

The two researchers also used follow-up open-ended questions as the interview progressed to allow the participants to further verbalize their experience of CL. They recorded interviews with the participants' consent. Then, they rationalized and transcribed them into sentence forms.

10. Data Analysis Procedures

10.1 Questionnaire Analysis

In the first phase of data analysis, the second and third researchers collected data from the participants' responses to the two parts of the questionnaire and presented them in a tabular form (Appendix A). They quantitatively processed them, not in a positivist inferential sense, but as a means to develop descriptive statistical data (Drew, Hardman & Hosp, 2008) (Appendix B) to help address the two research questions.

10.2 Interview Analysis

In the second phase of the qualitative data analysis, the first researcher analyzed the data collected from the 25 participants' interview transcripts. In his analysis, he was guided by the open, axial, and selective coding strategies developed by Strauss and Corbin (1998). These strategies allowed themes that reflected their own attitudes towards CL intervention to be created directly from their own responses. These strategies occurred recursively because data analysis began even in the early

phases of data collection, and different phases of coding reciprocally influenced each other. In open coding, the researcher carefully read each participant's transcription line by line and even paragraph

by paragraph or word by word until a point of saturation was reached to explore subcategories of coding with the research questions as a guide. During axial coding, the researcher linked them at the level of properties and dimensions. Re-occurring themes from the analysis of each transcript were constantly examined, compared, or contrasted within and across all data sources. In selective coding,
repeated themes were discarded and other closely conceptually interrelated ones were pulled together. The goal was to develop overarching themes.

Numerous sub-themes from the analysis of the participants' responses to the first interview question *What was good about CL features that could render it into a useful and beneficial pedagogical instrument*? emerged. For example, *better understanding and deeper knowledge; lifelong self-regulating learners in and out of academia; respect to others' ideas; diverse sources of learning;*

mutual accountability to achieve learning targets and a comfortable and safe learning setting. These sub-themes were categorized under three broad themes: Theme 1. *Academic benefits*; Theme 2 *Group positive interdependence benefits*; and Theme 3 *Psychological benefits* respectively.

During the analysis of the participants' responses to the second interview question *What were the causes of potential challenges that may impede EFL participants' successful collaboration within a group?* Numerous sub-themes emerged. For example, *no chance to practice critical thinking skills; teacher-controlled class; reluctance; and overcrowded classroom.* These sub-themes were assembled under four major themes: Theme 1 *Previous teaching/learning experience*; Theme 2 *Group composition*; Theme3 *Psychological constraints*; and Theme 4 *Learning space* constraint respectively.

In this research study, the first researcher used the triangulation technique. Findings of the analysis of the data sets obtained from qualitative and quantitative research methods were equally weighed and integrated into the Findings section below to avoid potential biases arising from the use of a single methodology. Triangulation was used to increase the credibility and validity of the research findings (Pelto, 2017).

11. Research Findings

11.1. Findings Related to RQ1

In this section, descriptive statistical findings gained from the analysis of the participants' responses to Part 1 of the questionnaire (Appendix B) and those qualitative ones randomly selected from their transcriptions to the first interview question *What was good about CL that could render it into a*

useful and beneficial pedagogical instrument? were combined to provide supportive data to help address RQ1 *How do EFL third-year students perceive CL intervention*?

In Appendix B, the "Agree" and "Strongly agree" responses are combined here as "Agree" when their figures are slightly different. Similarly, the "Disagree" and "Strongly disagree" responses are combined as "Disagree".

As displayed in Appendix B, statement 1, 75% agreed that *CL involves abundant opportunities to use the English language*, 15% of them disagreed and 10% were neutral. As for statement 5, 71% of the participants agreed that *CL helps improve interpersonal communication skills and strategies,* 19% of them *disagreed and* 10% of them were neutral. Statement 9 displays that nearly three quarters (73%) of the participants agreed that *CL helps develop lifelong self-regulating learners in and out of academia,* 16% of them disagreed and 11% were neutral. Statement 10 demonstrates that 72% of the participants reported that *CL inspires higher-order thinking skills and reasoning strategies,* 19 % of them disagreed and 9% of them chose neutral. As for statement11, 73% of them

reported that *CL encourages learners to gradually assume responsibility for their leaning processes,* 16% disagreed and 11% selected neutral.

These numerical findings are accredited by favorable attitudes made explicit by some of the interviewees' responses, which were grouped under theme 1 *Academic benefits*. Below are typical refined examples extracted from four female students (S2, S5, S9, and S17) and three male ones' (S4, S10, and S11) transcriptions. They declared why CL intervention elicited their positive dispositions:

> Better understanding and deeper knowledge is an outcome of engaging in analyzing and evaluating multiple perspectives and experiences students bring to the classroom. (S2)
>
> Acquiring language competence and fluency enables me to practice the customs of debate and discussion to better express and clarify my ideas and thoughts and present them clearly and convincingly. (S5)
>
> My ambition to endorse myself as an independent learner in academia and a successful teacher in my future career has become more attainable than ever before. (S9)

I have the necessary tools to become a literate citizen who is able to analyze controversial political, social, economic, and religious issues and rationally resolve them in society and the workplace has become feasible. (S17)

I become capable of constructing my own knowledge rather than drawing on the one fed by the teacher or the textbook. (S4)

Critical thinking competence I have acquired empowers me to infer, criticize, and synthesize to achieve a better understanding of other curriculum subjects such as literary texts. (S10)

Working collaboratively to exchange, negotiate, and evaluate ideas promotes my own critical thinking skills instrumental to a successful and independent learner. (S11)

Statement 3 indicates that 73% of them agreed that *CL fosters mutual commitment among group members to achieve their targeted learning tasks*, 19% disagreed and 8% were neutral. In statement 4.76% of the participants agreed that *CL helps maximize their own and each other's learning potentials*, 16% of them disagreed and 8% were neutral. In statement 6, more than three-quarters of the participants (78%) agreed that CL *stimulates a learning environment with divergent resources,*

skills and experience among group members, 15% of them disagreed and 7% of them were neutral. In statement 7, 75% of the participants agreed that *CL motivates them to care for each other's success and challenge in learning,* 16% of them disagreed and 9% of them were neutral.

These findings are endorsed by the positive attitudes of CL recognized by some of the interviewees assembled under *theme 2 Group positive interdependence benefits*. For example, below excerpts taken from two male (S8 and S7) and two female students' (S13, and S15) refined transcripts demonstrating why they were delighted with CL:

Collaboration to me means being open-minded to and appreciative of others' ideas and comments, even they differ from mine so that we can learn from each other. (S8)

I feel enthusiastic working in a learning environment conducive to respectful, trusty, and cohesive social relationships among group members in which all voices are heard and honored. (S7)

> Sharing learning objectives places a significant demand on me to make my unique contribution to the joint effort and show accountability to help others learn so that we can all celebrate the success of accomplishing mutual learning goals. (S13)
>
> A diversity of knowledge and viewpoints created within the group encouraging and providing one another with useful feedback promotes richer understanding. (S15)

In statement 2, a high percentage (72%) of the participants reported that CL *helps create a respectful and fear-free learning setting*, 16% disagreed and 12% marked neutral. In statement 8, 72% of them agreed that *CL builds self-esteem perception and satisfaction in students*, 17% disagreed and 11% were neutral. In statement 12, 69% of the participants agreed that *CL fosters equitable learning opportunities for learners*, 20% of them disagreed and 11% were neutral.

These findings are supported by a number of the participants' declarations of their positive attitudes regarding CL. They were assembled under theme 3 *Psychological benefits.* For example, three male students (S6, S19, and S20) and two female ones' (S21 and S23) refined interview transcriptions remarked why they preferred CL.

> I feel relaxed and comfortable expressing, exploring, and sharing ideas and thoughts, questioning and giving explanations, and seeking and offering assistance within the group with the minimal interference of the teacher. (S6)
>
> I have the feeling of being worthy and safe working in a class where my ideas, comments, and perspectives are attended to and counted. (S19)
>
> High expectations of the group success in the learning stimulate me to support and encourage each other's efforts to learn so that we can gain rewards and recognition of success. (S20)
>
> CL helps reduce or even minimize fear of criticism and failure in which low-achieving and shy learners are motivated to increase persistence to learn. (S21)
>
> Collective responsibility of learning among group members helps more significantly reduce the stress of achieving learning tasks than when working individually. (S23)

11.2 Findings Related to RQ2

In this section, quantitative findings in terms of percentages of the participants' responses to Part 2 of the questionnaire (Appendix B) and those qualitative ones in the forms of typical refined statements randomly selected from their responses to the second interview question *What were the causes of potential challenges that may impede EFL participants' successful collaboration within a group?* were combined to help address RQ2 *How do EFL third-year students perceive the causes of the potential challenges that may inhibit productive CL intervention?*

In their responses to statement13, 51% of the participants made agreed that they *lack awareness of inquiry-based teaching/ learning activities*, 39% of them disagreed and 10% of them marked neutral. As for statement 15, 53% of them agreed that *they lack awareness of proper collaborative*

communication skills, 39% disagreed and 8% of them were neutral. In statement 20, 61% of them agreed that *they lack adequate competence in English*, 30% of them disagreed and 9% of them reported neutral.

These numerical findings are further supported by refined quotations obtained from some of the interviewees' transcriptions demonstrating their concerns that negatively influenced their attitudes

towards CL. They were categorized under Theme 1 *Previous teaching/learning experience*. A female (S1) and three male students' (S18, S24, and S25) excerpts had the following comments:

> There is little or no chance to experience and acquire critical competence necessary to analyze, evaluate, and challenge each other's ideas. (S1)

> There is low-quality coordination among group members when engaging in problem-solving tasks because we did not offer opportunities to learn how to successfully collaborate. (S18)

> I did not have sufficient opportunities in the classroom to help improve my fluency and competence in English. (S24)

> I can never challenge the teacher's ideas because I do not want to upset him, who might, in turn, penalize me if I do so. My main concern is to memorize teaching materials and reproduce them on answer sheets to pass exams. (S25)

In statement 14, 35% of the participants *do not feel it is beneficial working in heterogeneous groups*, 48% of them demonstrated disagreement and 17% of them marked neutral. In statement 18, 57% of the participants *rarely trust their peers' comments and feedback*, whereas 38% disagreed and 5% of them reported neutral.

These statistical findings are further endorsed by qualitative ones obtained from some of the interviewees' responses grouped in theme-2 *Group composition constraints*. Representative excerpts quoted from a female (S3) and male (S12) students made the causes for their concerns evident. They had these comments :

> Few participants' comments are superficial and quite often irrelevant. Their participation is competitive rather being collaborative leading to chaos. (S3)

> Group members may be more or less of the same English levels. In consequence, low-level achieving students cannot gain useful benefits. (S12)

In their responses to statement 16, 62% of them declared that they *feel reluctant to participate in CL classroom activities,* 25% of them disagreed and 13% of them reported neutral. As for their responses to statement 17, 18% of them agreed that *they do not feel comfortable working in sex-mixed groups or pairs, 72% of them disagreed and 10% were neutral*.
These numerical findings are further supported by qualitative ones grouped in theme-3 *Psychological constraints*. A female (S22) and male (14) students' interview excerpts made explicit why such constraints could easily become a source of frustration in their declarations below :

> Being a member of a group or a pair of mixed-sex would make me embarrassed and inhibit me to participate in classroom activities. (S22)

> I fear being mocked by classmates because I do not have the necessary tools in terms of grammar, vocabulary, and critical thinking skills that enable me to be effective in the learning process. (S14)

As for statement 19, 57% of the participants agreed that *classroom size does not encourage useful collaborative interaction,* and 38% disagreed, and 5% reported neutral. A qualitative finding grouped in theme 4 *learning space constraint* accredits the numerical finding. This limitation is found to be a big concern for the reasons evident in (S16)'s declaration:

> 30-33 students in each classroom and the physical arrangement of group members would not facilitate productive interaction among them.

12. Discussion of Findings

Though the participants are unaccustomed to a collaborative style of learning, responses to Part 1 of the questionnaire and the ones to the first interview question, as shown in Appendix 2, confirmed that a high percentage of them ranging from 69% - 75% expressed their preferences toward CL. From a constructivist perspective of learning, a plausible interpretation to account for these positive

findings is that the participants benefited from engaging them in collaborative learning activities. Benefits were documented under three overarching themes: academic, social, and psychological.

Academic benefits are found to be the most recurring and most preferred. Such finding supports the one reported by the proponents of CL. For example, Ohta (2000) argues that in CL students find more opportunities to practice English in authentic learning situations while they exchange ideas and thoughts, clarify, negotiate them from multiple perspectives and defend them in order to make themselves understood and persuasive. Similarly, McDonough (2004, p. 208) claims that "Pair and small group activities provide learners with more time to speak the target language than teacher-fronted activities".

Ely and Thomas (2001) point to the significance of learning from diverse resources in gaining better academic outcomes "The diversity of skills, knowledge, and ideas in a group give rise to

multiple perspectives that enhance the group's capacity and accomplish tasks" (cited in London, Polzer & Omoregie, 2005, p.118). Similarly, Vygotsky (1978) asserts that such diversity provides a pool of knowledge made available by more advanced learners from which less competent ones can gain the skills necessary to develop higher mental functions such as thinking, reasoning, and problem-solving skills while negotiating, analyzing and evaluating group members' ideas and beliefs. A factor that helps learners become critical thinkers and motivates them to take responsibility for their own learning and thus promote autonomy and self-directed learning (Totten, Sills, Digby, and Russ, 1991; McDonough, 2004).

Gokhale (1995) claims that if the learning purpose is to encourage and enhance the growth of learners' critical mentality, CL is more effective than individual learning to achieve this goal. In a

similar vein, Johnson and Johnson conclude that "cooperative learning results in an increase in higher-level reasoning, increased the generation of new ideas and solutions, and greater transfer of what is learned within one situation to another" (cited in Nagel, 2008).

In terms of psychological benefits, they are congruent with Long and Porter s' (1985, p. 212) claim that CL facilitates learners' "entry into the richer and more accommodating set of relationships in small group interaction, in which a more comfortable and safe environment can be therefore created". Likewise, Jaques and Salmon (2007, p. i) assert that CL offers real opportunities for learners to "establish more effective relationships and can play a central role in developing key professional skills, such as listening, presenting ideas, persuasion, self-direction, and team working". A long similar argument, Kagan (1994) asserts that group members show commitment and feel responsible for their own as well as peers and hence each individual student's contribution to the attainment of learning is valued.

However, though the findings of the analysis of data related to the first research question demonstrate that CL intervention generates positive attitudes in the majority of the participants for several reasons, other participants resent it. The descriptive statistical findings of the analysis of

their responses to Part 2 of the questionnaire accredited by qualitative ones collected in the forms of quotations extracted from a number of the interviewees' highlight that productive CL was hindered by challenges that can negatively impact some of the participants' reactions toward it. They are *previous teaching/learning experience; group composition; psychological constraints; and learning space constraints*.

The first and the third constraints, namely, social and academic, are coupled with findings of other research studies blaming long-held teacher-centered teaching/ learning methods whose focus is on mastering grammatical accuracy, correct spelling, punctuation, capitalization and the mechanical transmission of knowledge at the expense of creating more opportunities for students to help them develop their language proficiency and acquire key collaboration and thinking skills, the outcome of which is that they lack the self-confidence to express, exchange and defend their own thoughts

and ideas and reflect on their classmates' ones (Hazm & Scholfield, 2007). By the same token, Bunderson and Reagans (2011) voice similar concerns when stating that language status and interactive collaboration are found to be among other common obstacles that impede CL in such a way that low-achieving students are inhibited in participating in classroom activities and are often undervalued. Likewise, Shimazoe and Aldrich (2010) stress that lack of interpersonal and teamwork skills may not only hinder group interaction but may also seriously influence the social cohesion among group members and their effort to successfully attain their learning goals.

Regarding the second obstacle, group composition constraints, refraining from working in a group with mixed-gender may be ascribed to strict adherence to social imperatives, and bias to gender in the Arab society in general. Besides, the findings of the present study indicate that classroom size (33-35 students) is found to be among other possible constraints to a fruitful collaboration. This finding is consistent with Gokhale's (1995) claim that classes should be divided into small groups with two to six members.

However, the preceding concerns do not suggest that the participants do not benefit from CL. On the contrary, the encouraging findings as reflected in the favorable attitudes of the majority of the participants give the concrete evidence that its intervention can significantly extend its effect fully when the necessary conditions are available.

13. Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, CL is an experience in liberal education that is worth investing in the benefits it brings forth to learners. It has a range of potential benefits, including developing students' critical skills and strategies and enhancing their interpersonal communication skills, self-confidence, and self-esteem, perquisites particularly necessary for higher education students to succeed and endorse perception of being an active agent in both academia and future workplaces. Perceived as such, CL can be viewed as being respectful of individual autonomy and capacity. It makes them feel valued and heard in the classroom community.

From our perspectives. the researchers made a list of eight practical and constructive recommendations for CL intervention to be effective and productive:

- the teacher must view learning, understanding and knowledge construction as the result of a continuous and active process of negotiation between the individual and the social setting where the individual's activity takes place rather than a solitary one;
- the teacher's role is not to transmit ready-made and plain information but to serve as a facilitator to stimulate students' thinking;
- fostering a productive and supportive learning environment;
- active engagement in meaningful learning opportunities should be encouraged;

- the classroom should be divided into small groups with diverse academic abilities and achievement levels;
- learners' persistence and responsibility for learning should be encouraged;
- words of praise and rewards must be present; and
- promoting inquiry and problem-based learning activities.

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Appendix A

Table 1. Participants' Responses in Figures

		SCALE				
No.	**Part 1: Positive features of CL.**	**Strongly agree**	**Agree**	**Neutral**	**Strongly disagree**	**Disagree**
1.	CL involves abundant opportunities to use the English language.	39	36	10	7	8
2.	CL helps create a respectful and fear-free learning setting.	35	37	12	8	8
3.	CL fosters caring and mutual commitment among group members to achieve their mutual learning tasks.	36	37	8	10	9
4.	CL helps maximize my own and each other's learning potentials.	37	39	8	9	7
5.	CL helps improve inter-personal communication skills and strategies.	35	36	10	10	9
6.	CL stimulates a learning environment with divergent resources, skills, and experience among group members.	40	38	7	7	8
7.	CL motivates me to care for each other's success and challenge in learning.	38	37	9	8	8
8.	CL builds self-esteem perception and satisfaction in students.	37	35	11	9	8
9.	CL helps develop lifelong self-regulating learners in and out of academia.	37	36	11	8	8
10.	CL inspires higher-order reasoning strategies and critical thinking skills.	35	37	9	10	9
11	CL encourages learners to gradually assume responsibility for their leaning processes.	37	36	11	8	8
12.	CL fosters equitable learning opportunities for learners.	33	35	8	9	11
	Part 2: Potential causes of ineffective collaboration	**Strongly agree**	**Agree**	**Neutral**	**Strongly disagree**	**Disagree**
13.	Lack of awareness of inquiry-based learning/teaching activities.	25	26	10	20	19
14.	I do not feel it is beneficial for working in heterogeneous groups.	18	19	18	22	23

15.	Lack of awareness of proper collaborative communication skills.	26	27	8	19	20
16.	I feel reluctant to participate in CL classroom activities.	32	30	13	13	12
17.	I do not feel comfortable working in sex-mixed groups or pairs.	9	9	10	35	37
18.	I rarely trust my peers' comments and feedback.	26	25	7	22	20
19.	Classroom size does not encourage useful collaborative interaction.	28	29	5	18	20
20.	I lack adequate competence in English.	30	31	9	14	16

Appendix B

Table 2. Participants' Combined Responses in Percentages

No	Agree	Disagree	Neutral	No	Agree	Disagree	Neutral
1	75%	15%	10%	12.	69%	20%	11%
2.	72%	16%	12%	13.	51%	10%	39%
3.	73%	19%	8%	14.	39%	41%	20%
4	76%	16%	8%	15.	53%	39%	8%
5.	71%	19%	10%	16.	62%	25%	13%
6.	78%	15%0	7%	17.	18%	72%	10%
7.	75%	16%	9%	18.	51%	42%	7%
8.	72%	17%	11%	19.	57%	38%	5%
9.	73%	16%	11%	20.	61%	30%	9%
11.	73%	16%	11%				