
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Implementing Collaborative Learning in Classroom Settings: Benefits and Challenges

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| ABSTRACT

This study investigates Moroccan EFL high school teachers' perceptions of the implementation of collaborative learning in classroom settings. 10 EFL teachers participated in this study through semi-structured interviews to explore the benefits of collaborative learning and the challenges that hinder its implementation in the classroom. Using content analysis, this study revealed that most teachers have positive perceptions of the implementation of collaborative learning in the classroom. They agree that collaborative learning increases students' engagement and participation, improves language proficiency and communication skills, fosters their critical thinking and cognitive development, enhances their academic performance, fosters learner autonomy and responsibility, and creates a supportive learning environment. However, significant challenges to implementing collaborative learning were identified in this study, including resource limitations, class time constraints, insufficient teacher training, and learner differences.

| KEYWORDS

Collaborative learning, Teachers' perceptions, Benefits, Challenges

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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Introduction

Collaborative learning has emerged as an approach grounded in constructivist principles that see learning as a social practice (Rochelle and Teasley, 1995). Macaro (1995) identifies collaborative learning as a situation in which students are motivated to work together to achieve common learning goals. It is believed that the implementation of collaborative learning has been linked to many benefits. However, its effective implementation faces some challenges. This study aims to investigate teachers' perceptions of the implementation of collaborative learning in classroom settings by addressing its benefits and the challenges that hinder its implementation.

Objectives of this study

The main objectives of this study are:

To investigate the benefits of using collaborative learning as a teaching method in the EFL classroom.

To explore the challenges that hinder the implementation of collaborative learning in the classroom.

Research questions

This research tries to answer the following questions:

What are teachers' perceptions about the benefits of using collaborative learning in secondary-level EFL classrooms?
What are the challenges that hinder the implementation of collaborative learning in the classroom?

Significance of the study

This study is significant as its findings may give a deep understanding of the implementation of collaborative learning in the EFL context. It gives insights into the benefits of using collaborative learning as a teaching method and the challenges that hinder its implementation in the EFL classroom.

Review of the literature

Collaborative learning

Collaborative learning is the collective effort of two or more students working together and sharing tasks to achieve their intended learning objectives (Barkley & Cross, 2014). Dellenbourg describes collaborative learning as "a situation in which two or more people learn or attempt to learn something together"(1999, p. 1). In their turn, Smith and MacGregor (1992) clarify that "collaborative learning is an umbrella term for a variety of educational approaches involving joint intellectual effort by students, or students and teachers together" (1992, p 11).

Review of empirical studies

Many studies have been conducted on the implementation of collaborative learning in various contexts and settings.

Yasmin and Naseem (2019) explored the possibility of promoting autonomy in Pakistani learners using collaborative tasks. 16 teachers from public-sector engineering universities in Punjab participated in this study. The study employed a qualitative approach and interpretive paradigm to explore teachers' beliefs about the role of collaborative learning in developing autonomy in learners through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. The finding revealed that learning in small groups instills learner autonomy. Collaborative learning enables learners to check their understanding with peers and to solve their problems independently without direct teacher interference. Moreover, collaborative learning develops learners' responsibility to control the organization of their learning.

Omodan (2021) employed literature analysis as a method with a focus on social constructivism as a theoretical framework to explore the possible solutions to the challenges of collaborative pedagogy in classrooms. The findings revealed that collaborative pedagogy increases students' interaction level, motivates them to engage in classroom activities, and helps to organize a classroom discussion or project. The study also found that power relations within the class, low-quality interactions among peers, and individualism hinder effective implementation of collaborative learning among students. In relation to the solutions, the findings suggested that unity among students, teaching cultural variations, and student readiness to interact with colleagues are essential dimensions of collaborative pedagogy that should be implemented and achieved in classrooms to improve students' performance, foster social relationships among students, and enhance collaborative learning.

Alzubi et al. (2024) examined teachers' perceptions related to students' engagement in collaborative learning, with a special reference to implementation issues and potential solutions to address the challenges. The study employed the descriptive survey design to achieve the research objectives. A sample of (US) EFL teachers at Najran University participated in this study, comprising 30 males and 25 females enrolled in the third semester of the 2023 academic year. The findings of the study revealed that EFL teachers have a positive perception towards the implementation of collaborative learning in EFL classrooms. They believe that teamwork improves students' learning efficiency and that decisions made by groups can be better than those made by individuals. The study also found that collaborative learning methods have many benefits. They improve learning efficiency, foster collective decision-making, promote experiential learning, encourage critical thinking, prepare students for professional environments, and increase student engagement. On the other hand, the findings indicated that teachers face challenges in implementing collaborative learning in EFL classrooms, such as managing diverse language proficiency, addressing cultural differences, ensuring impartial participation, managing group dynamics and conflicts, managing limited class time, accessing adequate resources, and lacking professional development and support. Concerning the solutions for effective implementation of collaborative learning in EFL classrooms, the participants suggested differentiated instruction, encouraged participation, effective time management and communication, language skill grouping, and EFL-specific teacher training to make the collaborative learning environment effective.

A case study on the implementation of collaborative learning in the Malaysian lower secondary classroom was conducted by Govindarajoo et al. (2023). The study investigated the effectiveness of collaborative learning in the classroom and the factors that hinder students' participation in collaborative learning activities. Qualitative methods, including group observation and semi-structured interviews, were used to collect data. The findings indicated that most students had positive perceptions towards collaborative learning in the classroom. They believe that collaborative learning helps them to achieve their learning goals if certain criteria are met. The first criterion involves the teacher's role, which was seen as essential in providing guidance and direction for the collaborative activities to achieve successful learning outcomes. The second criterion is the role of the group members, as when the group chooses its own members, the participants feel that better outcomes would be attained from collaborative learning. Concerning the factors that hinder students' active participation in collaborative learning, students' own self-image and perceptions of their own ability, personality clashes, unclear objectives for the assigned tasks, and lack of guidance from the teacher were noted as obstacles towards a successful collaborative learning experience.

Gautam (2025) conducted a survey research to explore teachers' insights regarding collaborative learning in EFL classrooms at the secondary level and the activities implemented to facilitate collaborative learning in EFL classrooms. Thirty teachers were randomly selected from various institutional schools in Siddharthaagar, Rupandehi, to participate in this study. Close-ended questionnaires were used to collect data to gather their insights on collaborative learning in order to achieve the research objectives. The findings indicated that group work, project work, think-pair-share, simulation, and role play were the activities implemented in collaborative learning practices. Teachers perceived that the integration of collaborative learning in EFL classrooms improves students' communication skills, fosters their important social collaborative abilities, encourages responsibility, and simplifies problem-solving, which can lead to positive outcomes and meaningful improvements in the learning process.

Moisés (2024) reviewed the existing literature to explore various collaborative learning strategies used in educational settings and their impact on students' learning outcomes and the relationship between these collaborative learning strategies and personality development. The findings indicated that small-group discussions, peer teaching, problem-based learning, and project -based collaboration are the collaborative strategies that emphasize cooperation efforts among students to share knowledge and to support each other to achieve common learning objectives. These strategies have many benefits. First, they help students gain alternative viewpoints and develop a clear understanding of the subject matter. For example, the exchange of ideas through group discussions and peer interactions enriches their learning experiences and increases their analytical and problem-solving competencies. Second, collaborative strategies develop students' communication skills that are not only necessary for academic success, but also for enhancing social relationships and professional contexts in the future. Third, collaborative learning strategies strengthen skills such as leadership, conflict resolution, and negotiation, which are considered essential for working in diverse group settings. These collaborative learning experiences promote a sense of community and belonging among students as they create a supportive learning environment where students feel valued and empowered to participate. In terms of personality development, collaborative learning strategies nurture and reinforce students' positive attributes such as resilience, self-confidence, and interpersonal skills.

Verma and Katoch (2024) explored teachers' perceptions, practices, and challenges related to implementing collaborative learning techniques in classrooms through a descriptive survey of 28 teachers in Himachal Pradesh, India, using questionnaires. The study found that collaborative learning fosters creativity, critical thinking, leadership, and confidence. Concerning the barriers to implementing collaborative learning in classrooms, significant challenges were identified, including constraints of class time, lack of student readiness and motivation, inadequacy of teacher training to implement collaborative learning techniques, and inadequate infrastructure and resources.

Methodology

Participants and data collection methods

To address the research questions and objectives, semi-structured interviews were used as a qualitative method to provide deeper insights into the research. 10 high school teachers were randomly chosen to participate in this study. Consent was obtained from the participants before conducting the interviews. The interviews were conducted individually after a brief introduction outlining the purpose of the study, using open-ended questions to elicit a wide range of responses from participants. The researcher recorded, transcribed, and analyzed each interview session individually using content analysis

Data analysis and findings

The core objective of this study is to investigate teachers' perceptions of the benefits and the challenges of implementing collaborative learning in the EFL context. After collecting data through semi-structured interviews, the researcher analyzed it qualitatively. Participants were labelled using numbers from teacher 1 to teacher 10.

Benefits of using collaborative learning as a teaching method in the EFL classroom.

Regarding the benefits of using collaborative learning as a teaching method in the EFL context, the thematic analysis of teachers' responses based on the first question: What are the benefits of using collaborative learning in the EFL classrooms? Sub-themes emerged during thematic analysis of the data: (1) increasing engagement and participation, (2) improving language proficiency and communication skills, (3) fostering critical thinking and cognitive development, (4) enhancing academic performance and knowledge retention, (5) fostering learner autonomy and responsibility, (6) creating a supportive learning environment.

Some of the participants' answers are listed below:

- T1: "Collaborative learning fosters students' engagement, participation, and interaction in the classroom".
- T2: "Students become more responsible for their learning while incorporating collaborative learning methods in the classroom".
- T3: "Collaborative learning is very helpful when students work with each other, their understanding and performance of the subject matter will be increased as they can learn from each other".
- T4: "Collaborative learning enhances students' engagement and language acquisition and encourages their reflection and critical thinking".
- T5: "Collaborative learning promotes student-student interaction and helps students to get explanations and learn from peers".
- T6: "Collaborative learning increases language exposure and practice, as when students work in cooperation, they actively speak, share ideas, and negotiate meanings using the target language. This strengthens their language proficiency".
- T7: "collaborative learning makes learning less stressful, especially for shy students. They become more active participants in the classroom. It also improves students' communication skills, which makes them more confident to use the language in real contexts".
- T8: "Collaborative learning enables students to understand and retain information longer. This will help them perform better in exams. Collaborative learning also helps students analyze and evaluate information, which improves their critical thinking".
- T9: "Collaborative learning encourages students to be autonomous as they become able to make their own decisions and to become responsible for their learning".
- T10: "Collaborative learning creates a supportive learning environment, makes learning enjoyable, and reduces anxiety".

Challenges of implementing collaborative learning in the classroom

Diving into the challenges of implementing collaborative learning, the participants were asked: What are the factors that hinder the implementation of collaborative learning activities in the classroom?

The qualitative analysis listed some challenges: (1) lack of resources and class time constraints, (2) insufficient teacher training, (3) learner differences.

The participants' responses are listed below:

- T1: "One of the problems I face is the lack of suitable resources when implementing collaborative learning. This affects the effectiveness of collaborative learning activities".
- T2: "For me, I struggle with time management in the classroom. The short amount of class time makes it difficult to carry out collaborative learning activities".
- T3: "Controlling students' conflicts and creating a suitable environment are some of the challenges that a teacher may face when implementing collaborative learning in the classroom. This is due to the students' different learning styles and cultural and traditional variations".
- T4: "I did not get the necessary training that might help me facilitate the collaborative learning experience in the classroom".
- T5: "The primary problem I encounter when integrating collaborative learning is the students' different levels of English language proficiency. This makes collaboration and communication difficult among group members".
- T6: "Students with limited English skills may feel anxious or avoid participation".
- T7: "Limited class time may discourage teachers from using collaborative activities".
- T8: "Insufficient materials or space for group activities can hinder collaboration among students".
- T9: "Teachers may not be adequately trained in collaborative learning strategies".

T10: "Limited resources and the constraints of time can hinder the implementation of collaborative learning that requires time and suitable materials".

Discussion and conclusion

Overall, it can be deduced that the implementation of collaborative learning has many benefits. Respondents postulated that collaborative learning increases students' engagement and participation in the classroom. This aligns with Omodan's (2021) study, which highlights that collaborative pedagogy increases students' interaction level, motivates them to engage in classroom activities, and helps to organize a classroom discussion or project. Moreover, it is deduced that collaborative learning improves and strengthens students' language proficiency and communication skills. This confirms with Moisés (2024)'s finding that collaborative learning strategies develop students' communication skills that are not only necessary for academic success, but also for enhancing social relationships and professional contexts in the future. Respectively, the researcher finds that collaborative learning encourages students to analyze and evaluate information which improves their critical thinking. This goes in accordance with Alzubi, Alzubi et al. (2024)'s findings, which highlight that the collaborative learning method encourages students to think critically. Another finding is that collaborative learning enhances students' academic performance. This complies with the perspective of Omodan (2021) who affirms that collaborative learning improves students' performance. Fostering learner autonomy and responsibility was also explored as one of the benefits of collaborative learning in this study. It is found that collaborative learning encourages students to be autonomous and responsible for their learning. This supports the research of Yasmin and Naseem (2019) as it deems that learning in small groups instills learner autonomy and develops learners' responsibility to control their learning. Additionally, this study reveals that collaborative learning creates a supportive learning environment for students, as it makes learning enjoyable and reduces anxiety. This matches the study of Moisés (2024) which indicates that collaborative learning experiences create a supportive learning environment where students feel valued and empowered to participate.

Although this study showed that the implementation of collaborative learning in the classroom has many benefits, the findings of this study also revealed that teachers encounter some problems. Respondents pointed out that they struggle with the lack of suitable resources and with the constraints of class time when implementing collaborative learning. This finding is similar to those of Alzubi et al. (2024) and Verma & Katoch (2024)'s finding that accessing adequate resources and managing limited class time hinder effective implementation of collaborative learning in the classroom. It is also found in this study that teachers' inadequate training is considered an obstacle to the implementation of collaborative learning. This finding is consistent with Verma & Katoch' (2024)'s finding in which inadequacy of teacher training was identified as a barrier to the implementation of collaborative learning techniques. Learner differences are another challenge that hinders the integration of collaborative learning, including students' different learning styles and cultural and traditional variations. This challenge aligns with Alzubi et al. (2024)'s finding that teachers encounter the problem of managing students with diverse language proficiency and different cultures.

To conclude, collaborative learning is recognized as an effective method in EFL contexts; however, it is necessary to address the challenges of its implementation. Efforts should focus on overcoming these challenges in the future.

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