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'We Divided the Questions Evenly among Ourselves to Answer them Properly': Collaborative Learning in EFL Classroom Status Quo

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Abstract
Collaborative learning is a pedagogical approach employed by language teachers to enhance language proficiency and improve the learning process. Students may be asked to work collaboratively inside and outside the classroom. However, studies examining the experiences of English as a foreign language (EFL) learners working collaboratively to complete tasks in Saudi Arabia are scarce. Thus, this study aims to answer these research questions: How do students engage in collaborative learning in a vocabulary course? How do students perceive the effects of collaborative learning in a vocabulary course? Data collection involved focus groups and retrospective interviews with fifty-two students majoring in human resource management at a Saudi university. The findings revealed that students performed five primary roles: translating English to Arabic, assisting their peers, searching for information, supervising group performance, sharing ideas and knowledge, and adopting different strategies to answer assigned tasks. It also identified the resources they drew on, the distribution of tasks, how they formed groups and engaged via WhatsApp. Positive views about collaborative learning included that it provided opportunities to practice the English language, facilitated understanding of information, made studying easier, and promoted social skills. The negatives mentioned were an unwillingness to work in a group and overreliance on others. This paper recommends that teachers supervise students' interactions to ensure each member achieves their maximum potential, while advising policymakers to encourage the implementation of collaborative learning in the language classroom.

Keywords: Collaborative learning, English as a foreign language classroom, EFL students, group work, language learning, pedagogy, status quo
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Introduction

Educators advocate collaborative learning pedagogy in higher education, noting its many benefits, such as enhanced student engagement and academic achievement (Qureshi et al., 2023). It also promotes knowledge sharing, improves communication skills, and helps learners form new friendships (Weinberger & Shonfeld, 2020). Furthermore, it develops students' self-evaluative judgement skills and teamwork skills (McKay & Sridharan, 2024). When collaborative learning occurred online, similar benefits were reported. For example, Oyarzun and Martin (2023) systematically reviewed the literature, dealing with collaborative learning online from 2012 to 2021, and observed that it provided students with opportunities to learn more effectively, acquire new skills, socialize with others and boost self-efficacy, confidence and engagement. Additional benefits included shifting task learning to become student-centered, thereby increasing autonomy and developing personalized learning.

Key factors were found to impact collaborative learning interactions, including, according to Gitterman (2008), a so-called 'hidden' or informal group that formed when students attended their first class, and which has its own communication style and interpersonal relationships but is not formally recognized by teachers. Other important factors are student's willingness to work collaboratively (Weinberger & Shonfeld, 2020), social media usage, and social presence in connection with other group members (Qureshi et al., 2023). Moreover, the students' digital literacy influences their online engagement in collaborative learning environments, and the uneven distribution of workload could influence collaborative learning interactions (McKay & Sridharan, 2024). The uneven distribution of workload is mentioned in the literature as 'free riding'. It refers to situations in which students rely on others to complete tasks and do not contribute evenly in groups, as they engage in collaborative learning, which represents a notable challenge negatively affecting collaborative learning interactions (Hei et al., 2015; Le et al., 2018).

What is Collaborative Learning?

Collaborative learning is a pedagogical approach in higher education, whereby knowledge is socially constructed through interactions between students working together performing open-ended tasks (Yang, 2023). Collaborative learning is also defined as "An environment in which students work together to solve problems and finish numerous assignments, not just by sharing knowledge but also by forming social and community partnerships" (Alzubi et al., 2024, p. 28).

According to Yang (2023), collaborative pedagogy usually involves students working in small groups on loosely structured activities, selecting and managing their own groups. Collaborative learning "creates conditions in which students can negotiate the boundaries between the knowledge communities they belong to and the one that the professor belongs to" (Bruffee, 1999, p. 144). An effective task of this type is the 'structured class discussion' (Gitterman, 2008), in which students are divided into small groups of four to six to work on a task and given clear instructions to complete it in a specific timeframe.

In Saudi Arabia, incorporating collaborative learning in the classroom is advocated as a tool to enhance English language learning skills and develop overall language proficiency (Abdelshaheed, 2024; Al-Ahdal & Alharbi, 2021; Aldossary, 2021; Alkhalaf, 2020; Alzubi et al., 2024, 2025). However, further research on collaborative learning in various EFL contexts is needed (Alzubi et al., 2024). Therefore, this study concentrates on collaborative learning in a vocabulary course to understand the perspectives of students at a Saudi university studying EFL. The following questions guide the study:

1. How do students engage in collaborative learning in a vocabulary course?
2. How do students perceive the effects of collaborative learning in a vocabulary course?

Literature Review

Cooperative Learning in EFL Contexts

The term collaborative learning is used interchangeably with cooperative learning (Alzubi et al., 2024, 2025; McWhaw et al., 2003; Yang, 2023). Therefore, research evaluating cooperative learning in EFL settings will also be discussed here.

In Saudi Arabia, the attitudes of students towards cooperative learning when developing English language at university level was examined by Khan et al. (2020) and Al-Malki et al. (2022) using quantitative measures. Khan et al. (2020) investigated the attitudes of elementary-level male EFL students towards using cooperative learning to learn grammar. Data were collected via questionnaires from 65 undergraduate students enrolled in the department as first years. The study found that cooperative learning developed students' interactions, as their comfort level when engaging with their peers was higher than when speaking with the teacher, helping weaker students to develop their motivation and confidence by increasing their opportunities to practice using English. Moreover, Al-Malki et al. (2022) explored the views of EFL Saudi female learners regarding the impact of cooperative learning on their academic and social skills. Data were collected from 100 undergraduate students majoring in computing and IT, and they reported that cooperative learning improved their social skills, enhanced their academic achievement, their leadership qualities, and their decision-making.

In Libya, Al Jawad (2023) examined the effect of cooperative learning on improving EFL university students' speaking ability using a quasi-experimental design. In total, 50 undergraduate students were divided into two groups: experimental and control, and issued a pretest and a posttest. The students in the experimental group scored higher than the control group on the posttest, denoting improved speaking ability.

These quantitative Likert scale (Khan et al., 2020; Al-Malki et al., 2022) and quasi-experimental (Al Jawad, 2023) based studies are recent and were conducted in EFL settings with university-level students whose first language was Arabic.

Collaborative Learning in EFL Contexts

Prior research has been conducted into collaborative learning to develop the English language in an EFL context among university students. For example, Heble and Mehta (2013) explored the effect of collaborative writing on the comprehension of literary terms and writing skills among undergraduate students majoring in English literature in Oman. Twenty-six female students completed questionnaires and interviews, and data were also obtained from individual essays and essays written collaboratively. Almost half the participants preferred writing essays collaboratively to writing essays individually. The students reported that their understanding of literary texts and their writing skills had improved due to collaborative writing, as it encouraged them to reread, edit, review, and share ideas.

In Korea, Chang and Windeatt (2016) investigated the process of developing collaborative learning practices among 47 low-level language undergraduate students attending an online English course over 15 weeks. Data were collected using five tools: reflective journals, questionnaires, written assignments, discussion forums, and emails. The study identified three

primary types of collaboration: reading peers' work, giving feedback, and group engagement. The participants developed their confidence, motivation, and knowledge as a consequence of reading and commenting on their peers' assignments. Additionally, they developed gradual trust and a sense of community through engagement in collaborative activities, and over time, hesitant participants became more willing to offer feedback and share their work.

In Indonesia, Listyani (2019) explored collaborative text analysis of journal articles in an academic writing course. Data collection involved reflective journals written by undergraduate students, direct observation, and interviews with two students. The students were required to work collaboratively in groups of two or three, and analyze journal articles dealing with language teaching, or the technologies associated with language teaching. The study found the majority of students enjoyed engaging in collaborative work, as it allowed them to share ideas, minimize stress, acquire new knowledge, gain a deeper understanding of content, and develop interpersonal skills.

Studies by Heble and Mehta (2013) and Listyani (2019) examined improvements in the writing skills of language students. However, whereas Heble and Mehta (2013) used mixed methods, Listyani (2019) used direct observations and interviewed just two students. In a fully online context, Chang and Windeatt (2016) explored the use of collaborative learning among students who never met their peers or teacher in real life, but did not include interviewing the students. The current study explored the use of collaborative learning during a vocabulary course delivered face to face, using focus group and retrospective interviews.

Collaborative Learning in the EFL Context in Saudi Arabia

Several scholars have previously researched collaborative learning in EFL in university contexts in Saudi Arabia (Abdelshaheed, 2024; Al-Ahdal & Alharbi, 2021; Aldossary, 2021; Alkhalaf, 2020; Alzubi et al., 2024, 2025). These studies are described in detail to help identify the focus of the current study.

Research on collaborative learning's effects on enhancing writing skills among EFL students was carried out by Alkhalaf (2020) and Aldossary (2021). For example, Alkhalaf (2020) examined the attitudes of female students towards collaborative learning to improve their writing skills. The study involved 50 students on an IELTS preparation course. Data were collected via questionnaires, and the students reported several advantages of collaborative writing: (1) planning and structuring essays, (2) enhancing the accuracy of their grammar and vocabulary, (3) developing their critical thinking, and (4) increasing their motivation and enjoyment. In Aldossary's (2021) study involving 46 male students, participants were divided into control and experimental groups and pre-tested and post-tested. The experimental group completed collaborative writing tasks over 8 weeks period and then completed a follow-up questionnaire after the intervention. The study found the experimental group scored better on the post-test and had improved their writing performance. The students in the experimental group also expressed positive attitudes about working collaboratively, having appreciated and enjoyed the opportunities to exchange their ideas and enhance their language comprehension.

Research was carried out by Al-Ahdal and Alharbi (2021) and Abdelshaheed (2024) to understand the effects of collaborative learning on enhancing the vocabulary of EFL students. In their study, Al-Ahdal and Alharbi (2021) examined the effects of collaborative learning with Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) on vocabulary retention for 160 students studying at two different universities. Their study employed an experimental design, dividing students

equally into control and experimental groups who were given a pre-test and post-test. The intervention with the experimental group involving collaborative learning with MALL lasted three months. The students in the experimental group improved their vocabulary retention and demonstrated greater motivation, engagement, and peer-interaction. Similarly, Abdelshaheed (2024) used an experimental design to explore the effect of digital collaborative learning on vocabulary learning and reading comprehension among language learners. She employed two tests and semi-structured interviews with 60 students on a reading and vocabulary-building course. Students were invited to work collaboratively with peers on structured activities, such as engaging in discussions, using Venn diagrams, and completing vocabulary quizzes online on Blackboard and Quizlet. She found the performance of the group who worked collaboratively outperformed that of the control group. It also emerged that the students valued the use of digital collaborative learning, as it provided them with support and encouragement from their classmates, and the dynamic activities assisted them in identifying their mistakes and learning at their own pace, reducing mistakes in subsequent tasks.

The effects of a collaborative learning program on students' social skills and English language learning at Najran university was examined by Alzubi et al. (2024). Their quasi-experimental design employed an experimental group and a control group and included a pre-test and post-test. They also interviewed the English teachers to acquire their perspectives regarding the effect of the intervention on the students' progress. They found that collaborative learning significantly improved students' English proficiency and social interactions. The teachers valued collaborative learning as it inspired and motivated the students to engage in groups.

More recently, Alzubi et al. (2025) examined the attitude of EFL students at Najran University towards using collaborative learning to enhance their English-speaking skills. The study required 360 students to fill in a closed-ended questionnaire. It determined the students were positive about collaborative learning to improve their speaking skills, reporting satisfaction regarding learning with their peers, enjoyment in identifying their roles during speaking tasks, and gratitude that the collaborative learning process afforded numerous speaking opportunities.

The methods in the studies reviewed were subject to some gaps that are addressed in the current study, which employed qualitative methods, in particular focus groups and retrospective interviews, to explore the features and activities students engage with when working collaboratively, both face-to-face and online. It also aims to evaluate the effects of collaborative learning from the perspective of students.

Methodology

This study utilized qualitative approaches and is a typical method for researching collaborative learning (Yang, 2023). It is also a valuable method in the field of applied linguistics, as it documents the development and beliefs of language learners (Lew et al., 2018). Data collection tools used were focus groups and retrospective interviews.

Focus groups can offer different perspectives about a situation, as they encourage participants to share their views (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). Retrospective interviews can help to uncover participants' thoughts and mental processes during a particular task (Dörnyei, 2007). The use of retrospective interviews to research collaborative learning in an EFL context with language students at the university level can effectively elicit vivid descriptions (Aldossary, 2021).

Participants in the focus groups were encouraged to discuss their previous and current experiences working collaboratively inside and outside class (see Appendix A). The participants

in the retrospective interviews were invited to discuss one situation, either a task where they collaborated with their colleagues inside the class or one where the collaboration took place outside the classroom. The participants were given time to visualize the task and then describe the processes involved in completing the task (see Appendix B). Focus groups and retrospective interviews were conducted via Zoom meetings, which assists in the collection of qualitative data (Archibald et al., 2019). Attendees were encouraged to share screenshots, websites, and photos to illustrate their responses.

Research Procedures

Data were collected at the end of November 2024 after the participants had attended 11 lectures for a vocabulary course, in which a collaborative learning pedagogy was implemented. The researcher was the course instructor, and asked the students to work collaboratively in-class for each lecture to perform several tasks related to the topic of the lecture and work collaboratively outside the class to present a topic related to the course concepts. The participants were encouraged to create and form their own collaborative groups comprising five to eight students, and were given a time limit to work on the in-class tasks. Focus group interview was used as the first data collection method, and retrospective interview as the second method. In the focus groups 52 students contributed to eight sessions (see Table1), and 29 students participated in the retrospective interviews.

Table 1. *The distribution of participants in each focus group session.*

Number of Sessions	Number of participants
Focus group 1	7
Focus group 2	6
Focus group 3	7
Focus group 4	6
Focus group 5	7
Focus group 6	7
Focus group 7	6
Focus group 8	6
Total	52

Participants

Purposive sampling was used (see Palys, 2008), in which the researcher invited typical participants with experience that aligned with the focus of the research (Dörnyei, 2007). Fifty-two students agreed to participate, all of whom were studying the course as a component in the fourth level of their Human Resources Management diploma at a Saudi Arabian University. The course is a vocabulary course, in which students study terminologies and concepts related to their major. The students received an information sheet about the study, the research tools and what participation would entail. The researcher explained the voluntary nature of the research, that data would be used for research purposes only, that the names of participants would be anonymized, and audio recordings would be deleted after transcribing the data. These considerations are mandated by the case study university's ethics committee regulations.

Data Analysis

Data from the focus group and retrospective interviews were transcribed in text form and uploaded to ATLAS.ti version 25, which is a computer program designed to assist qualitative data analyses. ATLAS.ti provides tools to select quotations, add codes, and retrieve the coded data.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), and themes were developed from codes to answer the research questions.

Results and Discussion

Research Question (1): How Do Students Engage in Collaborative Learning in a Vocabulary Course?

To provide a clear understanding of how the students engaged with collaborative learning from their own perspective, five themes were created from the data: (1) the roles these students performed in the group, (2) the resources they used, (3) how they divided up and distributed tasks, (4) the approach they followed to form groups, and (5) the WhatsApp group they created (see Figure 1).

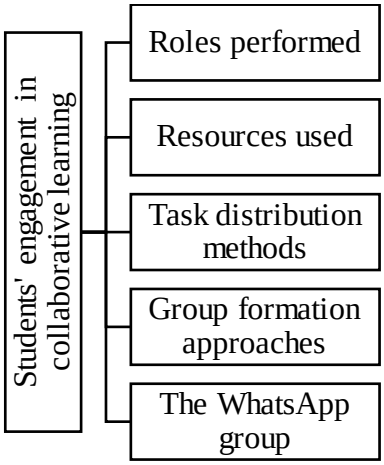


Figure 1: Engagement of the students in collaborative learning

Roles Performed

The students reported having performed different roles, some of which overlapped. These included translating from English to Arabic, assisting their peers, searching for information, supervising their group's performance, sharing ideas and knowledge, and adopting multiple strategies to provide answers for assigned tasks.

Translating from English to Arabic was one of the roles mentioned by the majority of the participants when describing their engagement with their groups. The participants translated both the unknown vocabulary and the questions. Participant 2 clarified that she translated the questions when she started working on tasks with the group. She explained, "Once we have formed the group, the first thing we do is translate questions from English to Arabic to understand them". Participant 26 explained that translating from English to Arabic is essential, as a way to begin any task, either in class or outside of the classroom. Participant 1 stated "my role was to present the functions of management, so I translated 'functions', 'organizing' and other words I did not know". It seems that translating from English to Arabic allowed the participants to function better, as they engaged in collaborative learning with the group. However, they were required only to use English during the course.

The participants reported that assisting their peers was another aspect of group work. The participants read the texts aloud to their peers, analyzed and corrected their answers, and explained information to them once they had understood the tasks. Participant 30 explained that she reads the texts aloud to her peers. She stated, "I read the questions aloud in English to help my colleagues

in the group". Participant 18 mentioned that she analyzed the answers provided by her colleagues and corrected them when they were wrong. She stated, "I help my friends in the group, and I explain the answers to them, of course, after I understand myself". Participant 40 stated, "I correct my colleagues' answers and help them when they need me to". This suggests that collaborative learning encourages the students to provide their peers with assistance. This confirms the result presented by Abdelshaheed (2024), who reported that collaborative learning when conducted online provides language learners with support from their classmates.

Searching for information is one of the roles that participants perform in the group. All the participants reported engaging in searching for information. Participant 14 explained that each member of the group searched for information. She stated, "some of us can find the information faster than others while others fail to find the information, but we all search, and this is what we mostly do as we work in the group" (P14). Participant 24 mentioned searching for information as an essential task, she stated, "if I have not searched, then I have done nothing to contribute to the group". Participants 49 and 48 explained that searching for information is the second role they perform after translating unknown words, noting that searching is the essence of collaborative work. It appears that working collaboratively develops the students research skills and their critical thinking abilities, as they evaluate and assess the information they find. This result is consistent with that presented by Alkhalaf (2020), which confirms that collaborative learning develops critical thinking among female language students.

Another role that the participants reported performing was supervising group performance. Participant 1 explained that in every group, a leader supervises the discussion and activities. She stated, "I am always the leader, and I ensure that each member is given the chance to discuss her answers". Participant 11 mentioned that supervising group activities is something she does to help ensure her group completes tasks on time. Participant 52 mentioned that she sometimes supervises ongoing work, as a leader is needed in each group for each lecture and each out-of-the class task. This result confirms findings reported in previous studies (Al-Malki et al., 2022; Listyani, 2019) that show collaborative learning enhances language student leadership quality and interpersonal skills.

In addition to the role of supervising group performance, is that of actively sharing ideas and knowledge. Participant 6 mentioned her role was to share her knowledge and experience. Participants 21 and 26 illustrated that they present their ideas in the group and express their thoughts to others. The participants considered the act of sharing ideas and knowledge to be a specific role when working collaboratively in a group. This result corresponds with the previous literature (Aldossary, 2021; Chang & Windeatt, 2016; Heble & Mehta, 2013; McKay & Sridharan, 2024), which demonstrates how collaborative learning encourages students to share their ideas and knowledge.

Adopting different strategies to provide answers to assigned tasks is amongst the roles students reported when performing in the group. For example, Participant 43 mentioned that she verbalizes what she is thinking, externally processing ideas when working in the group. Participant 20 reported that she discusses possible answers orally with her peers and her peers either support her opinion, or correct her when she is wrong. Participant 18 stated, "I write down the answers in my notebook, and my peers read from the notebook when the teacher asks someone from our group to answer". Participant 15 mentioned that they divide the answers to the tasks between them after they have finished, to participate actively when the teacher asks them to respond to tasks.

Resources Used

The resources the students reported using when working collaboratively in groups were Artificial Intelligence (AI) apps, Google app, translation apps, and notes app. The participants reported using three AI apps: ChatGPT, Poe, and Canva (see Figure 2).

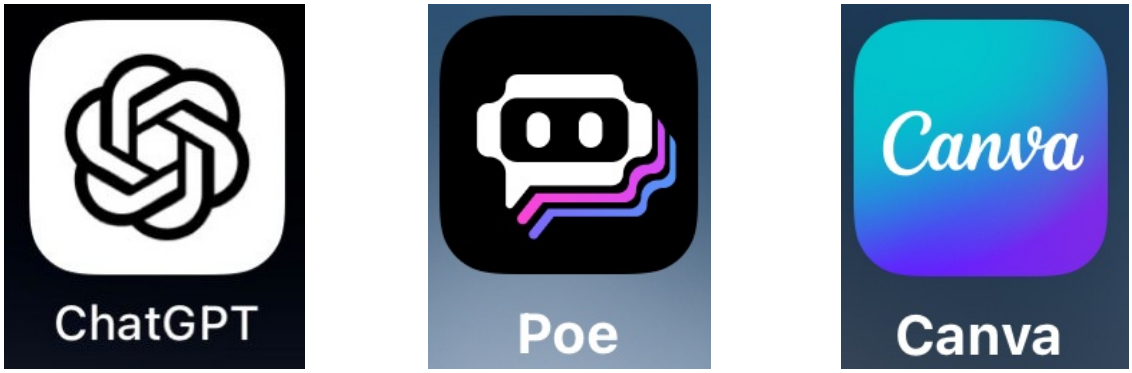


Figure 2.AI apps that were used by the participants

Most of the participants reported that they use ChatGPT to search when completing group work. Participants 10 and 12 mentioned having the ChatGPT app in their smartphone and using it to provide them with instant answers. The participants stated, "I use the ChatGPT app if answering the question is really hard and needs someone to simplify it for me and the group" (P22), "I know I should not say that! It is bad! but I use ChatGPT to check that our information is accurate" (P28). Participant 41 mentioned that she uses Poe to explain the questions in the task and to provide a simple answer. Participant 4 stated, "I used Canva because it helps me design PowerPoint presentations, using target terminology". This finding resonates with those of Alharthi (2024) and Pavlenko and Syzenko (2024), who observed that language students consider ChatGPT an essential tool for searching for information and completing language tasks. The Google app was also used by the participants to seek out information. The participants stated, "I mostly use Google to search" (P3), "In every class we search using Google. In fact, all of us search with Google" (P47), "What! Can you search without Google?!" (P50).

In addition to using AI apps and the Google app, participants reported using apps to assist them when translating from English to Arabic. Participant 50 mentioned using Google Translate to translate questions. The participants stated, "I take a photo and translate directly to understand the questions" (P2), "I copy and paste the text into Google Translate and did so several times" (P38). The participants also reported using the CollaNote app to translate from English to Arabic when working in a group. The finding relating to the use of Google Translate app are consistent with the finding of Bin Dahmash (2020), that female language students use the Google Translate app in-class as a resource for language learning.

Another resource used by participants when working collaboratively was a note app: Notability. This app assists students when writing down answers and creating charts to answer the questions in the tasks. Participant 4 mentioned that Notability helped them store and share their notes with the group via AirDrop when they have worked together. All the resources the students reported using were smartphone apps on their mobile phones.

Task Distribution Methods

The distribution of questions and items to complete tasks was decided by the leader, participants' preferences, number of questions and difficulty level. Participant 15 noted that every group has a leader not assigned by the teacher. Participants 14, 16, and 19 mentioned that the leader only divides up tasks but does not assign a member to each question, as the participants themselves choose the questions they think they can answer. Participants 36, 37, and 39 explained that the leader plans how she divides the questions, as each member must work according to her abilities and level of English. They mentioned that the member with the highest level of English takes the most challenging question and explains it to us, so that "we all learn, even those who are struggling with their English" (P37). Participant 4 illustrated that they agree with each other about how to divide up questions, and have freedom of choice, stating, "if there are many questions, we challenge ourselves to work beyond our capacity to succeed". Consistent with Oyarzun and Martin's (2023) finding, collaborative learning appears to promote personalized learning, as the participants choose the tasks they work on.

Group Formation Approaches

Strategies to form groups followed two approaches, i.e., either by the personal choice of participants or randomly. Some of the participants reported creating their own groups to work collaboratively with by selecting either peers with an outstanding academic level, or their friends. They mentioned that they chose colleagues who were proficient to improve their own performance. As participant 11 stated, "Success is contagious, and I like to work with those who are successful and learn from them". Those who chose their friends did so because they felt comfortable with them, as they encourage and motivate one another to accomplish tasks. The other participants mentioned creating groups randomly, either by choosing the nearest group, or by asking others if they want to join them as they do not have appropriate criteria. Participants 28, 29 and 30 reported that sometimes they work with those nearest to them in the class if they do not feel motivated to work, as working with friends causes more pressure as they want to please them.

The WhatsApp Group

The participants reported using online WhatsApp groups to collaborate during the course. The group was created using a smartphone application at the beginning of the term and includes all the students enrolled in the course as members; it was not supervised by the teacher. The participants shared handouts, discussed course requirements, and the resources they use to assist them in working collaboratively both in-class and out-of-class. Participants 5 and 3 stated that they created an additional WhatsApp group when they were required to work collaboratively to present concepts. They were asked to work and prepare for a slideshow outside the classroom, because they were required to present concepts to the class. This group affected what the participants did collaboratively in both modes in-class and out-of-class. The WhatsApp group resonates with Gitterman's (2008) hidden group, which influences students' interactions in collaborative learning environments.

Research Question (2): How Do Students Perceive the Effects of Collaborative Learning?

The data suggested the students had positive and negative views concerning the effects of collaborative learning, and that the positive outnumbered the negative.

The participants associated four positive effects with collaborative learning. First, it provided them with opportunities to practice the English language. The participants reported that working collaboratively provided them with opportunities to practice pronouncing business terminology and reading English texts. Participant 1 stated, "I rehearsed pronouncing revenues and expenditure with the group before the presentation". This result resonates with findings from the previous literature (Alzubi et al., 2025; Khan et al., 2020) that noted that collaborative learning provides language learners with additional opportunities to produce language.

The second effect was facilitating the understanding of information. The participants mentioned that negotiating and discussing information enabled them to learn in an enjoyable setting. Participants 11 and 13 stated:

P11: I learned about types of assets and liabilities from how we discussed them in the group. We laughed a lot as we had no assets or liabilities!

P 13: Yes, we had similar jokes about stocks and bonds. We own nothing, but I will never forget the meanings of these terms.

(Excerpt from focus group (2) translated from Arabic)

This result aligns with the finding of Listyani (2019), who reported that collaborative learning in language classes provides a more profound understanding of content. It also supports previous literature (Aldossary, 2021; Alkhalaf, 2020; Listyani, 2019) that characterizes collaborative learning as an enjoyable activity.

The third effect was preparing for examinations and making studying easier. The participants reported that working in groups reinforced knowledge and vocabulary retention, and that learning vocabulary improved their grades. The participants stated, "It improved my midterm grade, as I remembered how we had discussed some concepts in class" (P18) and "I will never forget the functions of business and I remembered them for the midterm" (P40), "it greatly improved my midterm grade" (P50). The results relating to reinforcing vocabulary retention is consistent with Al-Ahdal and Alharbi (2021), who found that collaborative learning improves vocabulary retention among English language learners at university level.

The fourth effect involved promoting social skills as teamwork, communication, and cooperation. The participants explained that working in groups encouraged them to help each other and share their knowledge. Participants stated, "it helped me develop my communication skills, as we support each other" (P1), "it motivated an environment in which we exchange ideas and help the group" (P6). This finding is consistent with that reported by Al-Malki et al. (2022), who noted that cooperative learning enhances students' social skills. This finding, as it relates to promoting teamwork, is consistent with Ojie-Ahamiojie (2024) who reported that collaborative learning develops teamwork skills.

Some negative views associated with collaborative learning were expressed by those participants who were unwilling to work in a group or accept what they viewed as overreliance on others. These participants reported that some students do not participate in the group, and benefit from the efforts of others. In addition, some rely on the most brilliant student to provide them with the answers. The participants also complained that they did not want to risk friendships or show a poor image of their group, so they did not speak with their teachers about colleagues who contributed little. Some examples of participants' comments are:

P41: Well, not all of us participate to the same degree

P44: You mean not participate at all. They might be silent all the time.

P42: When this happens, we do not tell you. We do not want to be snitches.

P46: Exactly, we do not want to embarrass ourselves in front of the others, so we do the activity with the cooperative members.

(Excerpt from focus group (7) translated from Arabic)

This finding, that not all students contribute well to group work, aligns with evidence presented by Hei et al. (2015) and Le et al. (2018), who classified students who rely on their peers in collaborative groups as free riders.

Conclusion

This paper examined how Saudi students engage in collaborative learning settings in a vocabulary course and their views regarding this approach. The roles the participants performed when engaging in collaborative learning were: translating from English to Arabic, assisting their peers, searching for information, supervising group performance, sharing ideas and knowledge, and adopting different strategies to answer assigned tasks. The resources they drew on were AI apps, Google app, translation apps, and notes app. Moreover, tasks were distributed and assigned by leaders in conjunction with participants' preferences, number of questions, and level of difficulty, and they formed groups either based on personal choice or randomly. Overall, the participants expressed more positive views about collaborative learning than negative views. Positive views included providing opportunities to practice the English language, facilitating understanding of information, preparing for examinations, making studying easier, and promoting social skills. Negative views included unwillingness to work with the group and frustrations with those who overly rely on others.

Based on the findings, several implications can guide the effective adoption of collaborative learning in language education. Teachers are encouraged to supervise the student's interactions, to ensure that each member participates, preventing 'free riders' in the group and helping each student reach their maximum potential. Teachers were advised to encourage their students to draw on AI apps and Google apps while collaborating. Policymakers could also promote the implementation of collaborative learning in language classrooms, as it offers opportunities for language practice and simplifies the learning process.

This research was limited by the gender of the participants and the data collection tools used. Future studies could include male students, which would provide a more comprehensive view of how language students engage in collaborative learning. Additionally, employing mixed methods along with both qualitative and quantitative data collection tools could lead to a deeper understanding of the impact of collaborative tasks on the learning process.

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About the Author

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Appendices

Appendix A: Focus Group Interview

Previous experience

1. Have you ever worked collaboratively in groups to present a topic or to answer questions as part of your English course?
2. What role do you usually perform when asked to work collaboratively in a group? Why?

Current experience:

1. How did you start answering the tasks/ questions in the group in the classroom? Describe in detail.
2. Did you choose the group members yourself? How?
3. When instructed to complete several tasks in a group, what did you do and why? Explain.
4. How did you distribute the questions/tasks in the group?
5. Did you use the Internet or any online resources when working in the group? Clarify.
6. Did working collaboratively enhance your vocabulary learning? How?
7. How did working collaboratively affect your midterm/coursework grades? Describe in detail.
8. Would you recommend continuing to implement collaborative learning in this course? Why?
9. Do you have a group related to this course that works together outside the classroom? Describe this group.
10. What is the best approach to implementing collaborative learning in English courses? Finally, is there anything you want to add that is not mentioned in the questions?

Appendix B: Retrospective Interviews

When choosing a task in the classroom:

What did you do when instructed to work collaboratively in the classroom? Describe this in detail, including how duties were distributed and how you communicated with your peers. After the time specified for the task was over, what did you do next? Describe the process you followed, e.g., reviewing the answers or discussing them with your peers.

When choosing a task outside the classroom:

When asked to present a topic from the course in front of the class, how did you prepare for the presentation with your group? Describe key steps in detail, e.g., collecting information, designing PowerPoint slides, and rehearsing the presentation.