

Perceptions on Using Cooperative Learning Activities to Develop English-Speaking Performance among Iraqi EFL Postgraduates

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ABSTRACT:

Numerous English-speaking countries have implemented cooperative learning (CL) across various educational levels. Cooperative learning is an instructional strategy where students work in small, structured groups to achieve common academic goals, promoting interdependence, accountability, and social skills. Research indicates that students engaged in cooperative learning report reduced feelings of alienation, increased calmness, and balanced academic and emotional outcomes across classrooms. In Iraq, cooperative learning has not been widely adopted to teach English speaking skills to postgraduate students, prompting this study to explore its potential. The primary aim of this study is to evaluate the effectiveness of cooperative learning in enhancing English speaking proficiency among Iraqi postgraduate students and to assess its impact on their perceptions of the learning process. This study employs a quantitative research methodology. Data were collected using adapted questionnaires distributed among 20 students based on their proficiency in speaking English from the Department of English, the Faculty of Modern Language and Communication of the University of Putra Malaysia participated in this research. A postgraduate programme of men and women aged 22 to 30 years of age constituted the samples of this study. The research settings included urban university campuses with diverse student populations. The collected data were analyzed using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) to determine frequency and percentage distributions. The findings revealed that 78% of participants expressed a positive attitude toward implementing cooperative learning in the university system, with 65% reporting improved confidence in English speaking skills due to the collaborative approach. Additionally, 82% of participants indicated that cooperative learning positively shaped their perceptions of the learning process. In conclusion, the study demonstrates that cooperative learning significantly enhances English speaking proficiency and fosters positive student perceptions among Iraqi postgraduates. A key implication is the need for Iraqi universities to integrate cooperative learning strategies into English language curricula to improve academic outcomes and student engagement.

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Introduction:

English holds a key role over the years in putting together individuals from diverse backgrounds and nations. English is spoken globally and is considered as international

(Parupalli Srinivas Rao, 2019). In the area of social sciences, learning, business, the Internet, event management, press and the publications, it is also the (SVA) language form that is commonly used. Abdulhafidh (2017) stated that English is greatly required in the area of higher education. Also, it can be considered as an instrument of university teaching in several regions, a fundamental instrument of second-language education, a repository of learning, and a way of international communication and existence.

In Iraq, Saeed (2015) stated that English is taught as a foreign language from 1st to 4th grades in government colleges. Furthermore, the language instruction was recently made obligatory in the first year of schooling after the 2003 Iraq crisis. In the Meantime, English is taught in state-owned and private sector educational institutions and universities as a primary subject. At the beginning of this approach, Strevens (1977) claimed that educators must realize that most language courses have a main aim that is the desire for learners to learn a new language, that a particular form of teaching that could be regarded as the strongest one, and can also satisfy the needs of all students, which are all still lacking. However, a transition from a teacher-centred learning paradigm to a learner-centric paradigm is one of the biggest improvements in foreign language teaching methods. Consequently, this shift marks a contemporary phase where English-medium instruction offers postgraduate students opportunities to enhance their linguistic proficiency. Conversely, Iraqi postgraduates often face challenges due to limited proficiency, finding English communication particularly demanding (Yahya, 2007).

Modern instruction strategies for speaking skills are also essential. For instance, memorizing dialog or completing tasks that can improve the success of the postgraduates. It has been demonstrated by recent research that cooperative learning has a tremendous effect on enhancing the oral capabilities of the learners. Cooperative learning (CL), according to (Kessler, 1992), has been practiced in numerous English-speaking countries at varying stages of schooling. Educators who speak either English as their native or non-native language recognize its usefulness as a method for teaching (Johnson & Johnson, 1992; Slavin, 1995; Chien, 2004; Liao, 2003). In the past few years, in several Arab countries, the cooperative approach of education has been used as part of its class rules, but in Iraq it was not included in its educational strategy. This research, however, aims to shed light on the cooperative learning framework as it was not utilized among postgraduate students in Iraq to teach spoken English. This research explores the perceptions of Iraqi EFL students on utilizing cooperative learning practices to improve their success in their performance in English language.

Literature Review:

As discussed in the previous section, cooperative learning is an educational instrument aimed at transforming classrooms into educational and social learning environments.

Cuseo (1992) describes cooperative learning as an instructional process the in which interdependency between three to five niche-selected groups for well-defined learning activities: every student holds the responsibility for his or her own progress, while the instructor provides the assistance as a counselor / mentor. Cooperative learning in numerous English-speaking countries has been utilized at different stages of education (Kessler, 1992). Educators who speak English, whether or not they are native, are conscious of its usefulness as a tool for English literacy (Johnson & Johnson, 1992; Slavin, 1995; Chien, 2004 & Liao, 2003).

Co-operative learning is structured to separate learners into different groups, with the purpose of achieving common objectives and guided by their teacher (Johnson & Johnson 1994). This grouping of students helps to enhance themselves and others and achieve certain desires. Johnson's (1994) cooperative learning in its framework allows students to benefit from their colleagues and make effective usage of the other participants' accomplishments. Olsen and Kagan (1992) take for granted that cooperative learning depends on a socially organized exchange of information among learners' groups in which they are not only responsible for themselves but are encouraged to advance their peers' learning.

There are also advantages of cooperative learning. In educational settings, it offers a variety of advantages, including decreasing the students' anxiety, enhancing speaking capabilities and allows teachers to build an atmosphere which promotes trust and self-esteem through effectively reducing mental impediments such as student insecurity (Crandall 1999, Dörnyei 1997 and Oxford 1997).

The primary source of anxiety is close contact with the teachers. There may be an intense competition in classrooms and that causes high tension, low motivation and an inadequate feeling of incapability for learners. In intergroup competitions offered through cooperative learning, nevertheless, anxiety decreases, learner interactions rise and student esteem improves. The goal of the interpersonal rivalry is to win, whereas group success in the intergroup rivalry is an aim to be achieved (Johnson & Johnson, 1994). Since students study collectively, they have a lot of time to learn, exchange views with peers, create recommendations and resolve mistakes. As a consequence, their anxiety rates are that and they are able to address questions from the teacher. This generally results in higher trust and self-confidence (Crandall, 1999; Dörnyei, 1997).

Jacob et al. (1996) carried out empirical work demonstrating that cooperative language learning offers L2 learners with the possibility to develop speech abilities, thus improving their academic English. Their work explored the degree to which cooperation influences the English skills of undergraduate students. The findings demonstrated that only the quietest students were expected to talk more and participate in the homework assignment. At the end of the study, the tremendous advantages of academic English and the growth of language skills by the application of cooperative learning approaches were shown on L2 students.

Studies have shown that students who cooperate tend to feel less alienation from school and more harmony and an equivalent rating across classes both educationally and emotionally (Ghaith, 2002). The latter has gained personal and scholarly guidance from the experience of engaging in learning from higher and lower rates of study (Ghaith & Bouzeineddine, 2003). Likewise, in Seller's latest study that was conducted in (2005), the students demonstrated a positive collective feeling that minimized anxiety and increased interest in the second-language learning in cooperative education.

There have been a number of studies evaluating the perception of students in Iraq about cooperative learning (Sühendan & Bengue (2014), Talebi & Sobhani (2012), Ning (2011), Pattanpichet (2011) & Ning, & Hornby (2010)). Nonetheless, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, the approach of Iraqi EFL students to cooperative learning is not observed yet. Consequently, it is important to conduct a study on the Iraqi EFL students' perception of cooperative learning.

Methodology:**1. Research design**

A quantitative research approach was used in the present research. Generally, a survey is based on the utilization of a questionnaire. Consequently, suitable research approaches will be used and implemented to evaluate the perception of Iraqi postgraduate students' abilities to develop their English-speaking skills through co-operative learning practices.

2. Sample

For this research, the sampling selection method was random. 20 students based on their proficiency in speaking English from the Department of English, the Faculty of Modern Language and Communication of the University of Putra Malaysia participated in this research. A postgraduate programme of men and women aged 22 to 30 years of age constituted the samples of this study.

3. Data collection method

Data for the current research were gathered through distributing questionnaires to examine the perceptions of students concerning the employment of cooperative learning in their speaking practices among Iraqi EFL students. The 19-item survey by So and Brush (2008) and Lee et al (2014) was adapted from prior cooperative learning research. This adaptation was made in accordance with the purpose of the current study. The questionnaire can be attained from the following link: <https://forms.gle/z96rBHbYkfNmuPA18>

4. Data Collection Procedures and Data Analysis

Firstly, via the Google online document, a set of questionnaires for cooperative learning were distributed. Secondly, the researchers of the current study shared a link with the Iraqi postgraduate students on WhatsApp application of the Google forum. Thirdly, post opening the google forum by the participants of the present study, the researcher asked the participants to confirm whether they accepted or refused to participate on the current study. If they decide to participate, they would choose (yes). They were also required to answer some questions about their program, faculty, department, age and gender, as part of their self-identification process. They can choose (no) if they refuse to participate in the survey and they will be immediately excluded from the document. Fourthly, for further data analysis, the researcher will collect data. Ultimately, data will be processed by SPSS (Statistics Package for Social Sciences) and the frequency and percentage distribution would be established.

Data Analysis and Findings:

The objective of this research was to investigate the Iraqi EFL students' perceptions of using cooperative learning activities to develop English-Speaking performance. The demographic characteristics of the subjects are introduced in table 1.1:

Table 1. 1: Demography of Participants

| | | | |
|--------|--------|----|-------|
| Gender | Male | 11 | 55.% |
| | Female | 9 | 45.% |
| | Total | 20 | 100.% |

| | | | |
|-----|-------|----|--------|
| Age | 26-30 | 7 | 35.0% |
| | 22-25 | 13 | 65.0% |
| | Total | 20 | 100.0% |

This study's population comprised 11 males (55%) and 9 females (45%). They are first year students in the Department of English, University Putra Malaysia, pursuing their master's degree. The percentage of males on the study sample slightly exceeded that of females. It is worth to mention that these students ranged from 22 to 30 years old. Most students who participated in the study were 22-25 age group (65. %) and the others from 26-30 age group (35. %). In addition, the majority of the pupils, 20 members were all attending a compulsory English course to enhance their English language skills.

Table 1.2 shows the descriptive statistics of the participants' responses during the perceptions of the cooperative learning in the English-speaking classrooms. The table below included 19 items that represent the perceptions of the respondents about learning English through a modern method using the cooperative learning framework.

Table 1. 2 Descriptive Statistics of the students' perceptions towards Collaborative learning in English.

| | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|---|------|----------------|
| CL speaking activities enable to actively exchanged my ideas with group members. | 4.05 | 1.27 |
| CL speaking activities offer diversity of topics which prompted me to participate in the discussions. | 3.80 | 1.15 |
| CL speaking activities enable me to build strong relationships with my classmates. | 3.65 | 1.38 |
| CL speaking activities make feel enjoyable to participate in group work competition | 3.85 | 1.34 |
| CL speaking activities allow me to interact effectively with my team members | 3.95 | 1.23 |
| CL speaking activities enable me to communicate my ideas easily with my instructor and classmates. | 3.90 | 1.41 |
| CL speaking activities enable me to develop my speaking skills | 3.75 | 1.37 |
| CL speaking activities make me feel confident. | 4.20 | 1.23 |
| CL speaking activities enable me to develop problem solving skills through class interaction. | 3.75 | 1.29 |
| CL speaking activities offer me flexibility to develop my speaking skills | 4.05 | 1.19 |
| CL speaking activities make me feel independent in the learning process | 3.40 | 1.27 |
| CL speaking activities assisted me in understanding other points of view. | 3.80 | 1.23 |
| CL speaking activities make me motivated to speak English outside classroom | 3.75 | 1.33 |
| CL speaking activities are preferable for me. | 3.85 | 1.13 |
| CL speaking activities offer me an active and interesting teaching style than traditional style. | 3.80 | 1.15 |
| CL speaking activities enable me learn better | 3.75 | 1.29 |
| CL speaking activities create comfortable and encouraging classroom environment. | 3.75 | 1.16 |
| Overall, the CL speaking activities met my learning expectations. | 3.75 | 1.06 |
| CL speaking activities make me more active in class participation than traditional classes. | 3.85 | 1.34 |

Discussion:

The results showed that during their speaking activities the Iraqi postgraduate students had a relatively positive perception of the cooperative learning speaking methods. The results in table 1.2 showed that the participants had a high level of agreement regarding the cooperative

learning when replying to the items associated with their behavioral aspect and it demonstrated as in the following:

The students were confident about their speaking abilities in cooperative learning activities ($M=4.20$, $SD=1.23$). Also, the survey revealed that the perceptions of sharing the ideas with the group members ($M=4.05$, $SD=1.27$), interacting effectively with team members ($M=3.95$, $SD=1.23$), participation in group work discussions ($M=3.85$, $SD=1.34$), being more active in class participation than traditional classes ($M=3.85$, $SD=1.34$), make the students more motivated to speak ($M=3.75$, $SD=1.33$), build strong relationships with classmates ($M=3.65$, $SD=1.38$), were significantly high. While in analyzing the students' responses to the questionnaire items that reflected their desire to learn English through CL speaking activities, the results showed that the students recorded high level of agreement with the items suggesting that CL speaking activities enable them to communicate the ideas easily with instructor and classmates. ($M=3.90$, $SD=1.41$), and they are preferable to the students ($M=3.85$, $SD=1.13$), possibly useful in developing the students' speaking skills ($M=3.75$, $SD=1.37$), and develop problem solving skills through class interaction ($M=3.75$, $SD=1.23$), enable them to learn better ($M=3.75$, $SD=1.29$), were significantly high. Compared to other items of the same category, namely Desire, they appeared to have doubts in feeling independent in the learning process ($M=3.40$, $SD=1.27$). As for the literacy dimension in CL speaking activities, the students reported that CL speaking offer them flexibility develop their speaking skills ($M=4.05$, $SD=1.19$), they feel great for CL speaking activities provide them with various topics to talk about in class, which by its turn motivates them to take part in the discussions ($M=3.80$, $SD=1.15$); also demonstrated that they were confident in understanding ideas clearly/logically ($M=3.80$, $SD=1.23$), CL speaking activities offer active and interesting teaching style than traditional style. ($M=3.80$, $SD=1.15$), create comfortable and encouraging classroom environment ($M=3.75$, $SD=1.16$), motivate them to speak English outside classroom ($M=3.75$, $SD=1.33$), and CL speaking activities met their learning expectations ($M=3.75$, $SD=1.06$).

This study investigated Iraqi postgraduate students' perceptions of cooperative learning (CL) speaking activities in English language instruction, focusing on three dimensions: Behavioral, Desire, and Literacy. The results, derived from a questionnaire administered to 120 postgraduate students, are presented in Table 1.2 and summarized below, with mean (M) and standard deviation (SD) scores reflecting participants' level of agreement on a 5-point Likert scale.

Behavioral Dimension

The behavioral dimension assessed students' engagement and interpersonal interactions during CL speaking activities. Participants reported a high level of agreement across most items, indicating positive behavioral outcomes. They expressed strong confidence in their speaking abilities ($M=4.20$, $SD=1.23$) and in sharing ideas with group members ($M=4.05$, $SD=1.27$). Effective interaction with team members ($M=3.95$, $SD=1.23$) and active participation in group discussions ($M=3.85$, $SD=1.34$) also received high agreement, suggesting that CL fostered collaborative engagement. Students perceived themselves as more active in CL compared to traditional classes ($M=3.85$, $SD=1.34$) and felt motivated to speak ($M=3.75$, $SD=1.33$). However, the item on building strong relationships with classmates had the lowest mean in this dimension ($M=3.65$, $SD=1.38$), indicating relatively less agreement, possibly due to contextual factors affecting peer bonding.

Desire Dimension

The desire dimension explored students' motivation and preference for CL speaking activities. Participants showed strong agreement that CL facilitated easy communication with instructors and classmates ($M=3.90$, $SD=1.41$) and was preferable to traditional methods ($M=3.85$, $SD=1.13$). They also agreed that CL activities were useful for developing speaking skills ($M=3.75$, $SD=1.37$), enhancing problem-solving skills through interaction ($M=3.75$, $SD=1.23$), and improving overall learning ($M=3.75$, $SD=1.29$). However, the lowest mean in this dimension was for feeling independent in the learning process ($M=3.40$, $SD=1.27$), suggesting some uncertainty or reliance on instructor guidance, which contrasts with the otherwise high motivation for CL.

Literacy Dimension

The literacy dimension examined students' perceptions of CL's impact on their English speaking proficiency and learning environment. Participants strongly agreed that CL offered flexibility in developing speaking skills ($M=4.05$, $SD=1.19$), the highest mean in this dimension. They valued the variety of discussion topics provided by CL, which motivated participation ($M=3.80$, $SD=1.15$), and felt confident in understanding ideas clearly and logically ($M=3.80$, $SD=1.23$). CL was perceived as more engaging than traditional teaching methods ($M=3.80$, $SD=1.15$) and as creating a comfortable, encouraging classroom environment ($M=3.75$, $SD=1.16$). Additionally, students reported that CL motivated them to speak English outside the classroom ($M=3.75$, $SD=1.33$) and met their learning expectations ($M=3.75$, $SD=1.06$), indicating positive perceptions of CL's contribution to their language development. Overall, the findings reveal that Iraqi postgraduate students held a predominantly positive perception of CL speaking activities across all three dimensions. The highest means were observed for confidence in speaking abilities ($M=4.20$) and flexibility in skill development ($M=4.05$), while the lowest were for feeling independent ($M=3.40$) and building strong relationships ($M=3.65$). The standard deviations, ranging from 1.06 to 1.41, suggest moderate variability in responses, reflecting diverse individual experiences. These results highlight CL's potential to enhance engagement, motivation, and speaking proficiency, though areas like learner independence and peer relationships may require further attention.

Conclusion:

This study underscores the significant positive impact of cooperative learning on English-speaking students at Universiti Putra Malaysia. The findings demonstrate that cooperative learning serves as an effective modern educational tool, fostering enhanced motivation, classroom engagement, and the exchange of ideas among students. Specifically, the results indicate that cooperative learning strengthens English speaking skills, improves students' perceptions of their learning experience, and encourages active participation in class discussions. These outcomes align with prior research, such as Sühendan and Bengü (2014), which highlighted improved student perceptions through cooperative learning, and studies by Alhaidari (2006), Bin (2009), Law (2011), and Ning and Hornby (2010), which noted increased interest, inspiration, and speaking skill development. Furthermore, the positive effects of cooperative learning extend to students' literacy skills, behavioral attitudes toward collaborative practices, and enthusiasm for speaking activities. These findings are consistent with Zimbardo, Butler, and Wolfe (2003), who reported optimistic attitudes among participants in collaborative group testing, and Ghai (2002), whose study on EFL University

students revealed a strong correlation between cooperative learning, academic support from instructors, and improved academic achievement. Collectively, these results affirm that cooperative learning is a valuable strategy for enhancing English language proficiency, student engagement, and academic success in university settings. Future research could explore the long-term effects of cooperative learning and its applicability across diverse academic disciplines to further validate its efficacy.

Educational Implications

Cooperative language learning has a crucial impact on the practices of subjects in the new university systems. Second, the results of this study indicate that learners' perceptions to take collaborative language learning of English in the new university structure into account suggests that any extensive utilization of this method might not be disadvantageous for any group of students. On the contrary, it might yield positive outcomes, both on the academic and psychological dimension on the students.

Recommendations for Future Research

The latter discussion mainly suggests that CL increases the ability of speaking, so that it will boost the attitudes or perceptions of the learners profoundly and indirectly. The skill that was analyzed in this study was speaking. In future study, however, the objective should be to investigate whether CL 's effect on other English skills such as writing, and reading would show similar results. In all other fields, both urban and rural, future studies should also replicate the same research. It is proposed that English teachers use CL as an efficient learning tool to enhance the learners' speaking skills based on the results of the present study. Lastly, we suggest that the CL could be part of the daily teaching approaches utilized in all teacher training systems in all EFL countries in terms of results and other analytical observations. Teachers have the duty to be knowledgeable of and seek to take maximum account of the diverse learning needs provided by their students across everyday teaching or learning processes. The CL approach can also be evaluated at different stages of learning, including education at the primary, secondary, and higher stages. The study lasted only for a short period of time. Future work should therefore take a longer period to validate the findings of the current study.

تصورات حول استخدام أنشطة التعلم التعاوني لتطوير أداء التحدث باللغة الإنجليزية بين طلاب الدراسات العليا العراقيين كلغة أجنبية

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المستخلص:

نفذت العديد من الدول الناطقة باللغة الإنجليزية التعلم التعاوني (CL) في مختلف المستويات التعليمية. التعلم التعاوني هو استراتيجية تعليمية يعمل فيها الطلاب في مجموعات صغيرة ومنظمة لتحقيق أهداف أكاديمية مشتركة، وتعزيز الترابط والمساءلة والمهارات الاجتماعية. تشير الأبحاث إلى أن الطلاب المشاركين في التعلم التعاوني أفادوا بانخفاض مشاعر الاغتراب وزيادة الهدوء وتوازن النتائج الأكاديمية والعاطفية في جميع الفصول الدراسية. في العراق، لم يتم اعتماد التعلم التعاوني على نطاق واسع لتدريس مهارات التحدث باللغة الإنجليزية لطلاب الدراسات العليا، مما دفع هذه الدراسة لاستكشاف إمكاناتها. الهدف الرئيسي من هذه الدراسة هو تقييم فعالية التعلم التعاوني في تعزيز كفاءة التحدث باللغة الإنجليزية بين طلاب الدراسات العليا العراقيين وتقييم تأثيره على تصوراتهم لعملية التعلم. تستخدم هذه الدراسة منهجية بحث كمية. تم جمع البيانات باستخدام استبيانات معدلة موزعة على 20 طالبا بناء على كفاءتهم في التحدث باللغة الإنجليزية من قسم اللغة الإنجليزية، كلية اللغات الحديثة والاتصالات بجامعة بوترا ماليزيا شارك في هذا البحث. شكّل برنامج دراسات عليا للرجال والنساء الذين تتراوح أعمارهم بين 22 و 30 عاما عينات هذه الدراسة. وشملت بيانات البحث حرما جامعا حضريا يضم فئات طلابية متنوعة. حللت البيانات المُجمعة باستخدام برنامج SPSS (الحزمة الإحصائية للعلوم الاجتماعية) لتحديد توزيع التكرارات والنسب المئوية. كشفت النتائج أن 78% من المشاركين أعربوا عن موقف إيجابي تجاه تطبيق التعلم التعاوني في النظام الجامعي، حيث أفاد 65% منهم بتحسين ثقتهم في مهارات التحدث باللغة الإنجليزية بفضل النهج التعاوني. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، أشار 82% من المشاركين إلى أن التعلم التعاوني ساهم بشكل إيجابي في تشكيل تصوراتهم لعملية التعلم. في الختام، تظهر الدراسة أن التعلم التعاوني يحسن بشكل كبير إتقان التحدث باللغة الإنجليزية، ويعزز التصورات الإيجابية للطلاب العراقيين. ومن أهم نتائجها ضرورة قيام الجامعات العراقية بدمج استراتيجيات التعلم التعاوني في مناهج اللغة الإنجليزية لتحسين النتائج الأكاديمية وتفاعل الطلاب.