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Iraqi EFL Student Attitudes toward Online Collaborative Learning in classroom Practice

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Abstract

The current study explored Iraqi EFL senior student beliefs about online collaborative learning (OCL) as a classroom practice, traditionally an unresolved issue from a pedagogical perspective in Iraq, and the sociocultural, infrastructural and historical explainers for both learners' acceptance of technology-enhanced collaborative pedagogy within this higher education landscape. As a part of this research, we conducted a Cross-sectional Survey design based on socioconstructivist theoretical frameworks (Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, Swain's output hypothesis). The sample of the study comprised (126) undergraduates females and males EFL students from two universities four colleges in Iraq, English departments at both the University of Samarra and the University of Tikrit responded to a 19-item questionnaire with Likert-scale items measuring their attitudes (cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions) toward OCL. Psychometric properties of the Ku et al. adapted instrument aeos, validating and verifying production performance via the statistical methodology of the reliability expert test method. Perceived collaboration, as seen in Table 3, had an overall composite mean of 3.493 (SD=1.247), which fell into the descriptive statistical analysis category of "Moderate-High" level. However, one key contradiction was observed in this data: the high bonding levels on socio-emotional grounds (high shared personal information scores $\bar{x}$ = 4.465 and interpersonal trust scores ($\bar{x}$ = 3.953), which were affirmed by emotionally but not functionally supercession practice signaled low task orientation ratings across professions experience sharing ($\bar{x}$ = 2.52) and very low communicative frequency overall ($\bar{x}$ = 2.74). Alongside the conflict typically associated with ambiguity around roles, there is also a loss of part of what makes collaboration about collaboration, namely purpose, as ambiguity forms when it comes to goals as well. These findings indicate that the existence of a positive social climate does not already mean high productive knowledge co-construction. The findings of the study indicate that careful structural intervention to delineate roles explicitly, semi-formalizing knowledge-sharing routines and systematic mechanisms for accountability must be adopted to transform relational capital into substantive collaborative learning processes in Iraqi EFL contexts.

Keywords: EFL, Iraqi, Collaborative Learning, Online Learning, OCL.

اتجاهات طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية العراقيين نحو التعلم التشاركي عبر الإنترنت في الممارسة الصفية"

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المستخلص

استكشفت الدراسة الحالية معتقدات طلاب المرحلة الجامعية الأولى (البكالوريوس) في تخصص اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية فيما يتعلق بالتعلم التشاركي عبر الإنترنت كممارسة صفية، وهي قضية لا تزال غير محلولة من منظور تربوي في العراق، بالإضافة إلى استكشاف المفسرات الاجتماعية الثقافية والبنية التحتية والتاريخية لقبول المتعلمين لعلم أصول التدريس التشاركي المعزز بالتكنولوجيا ضمن هذا المشهد التعليمي العالي. كجزء من هذا البحث، تم تصميم دراسة مسحية مقطعية اعتمادًا على الأطر النظرية الاجتماعية البنائية (منطقة التطور القريب لدى فيجوتسكي، وفرضية المخرجات لدى سوين). تألفت عينة الدراسة من (126) طالبًا وطالبة من المرحلة الجامعية الأولى في تخصص اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية من جامعتين وأربع كليات في العراق، وتحديدًا من أقسام اللغة الإنجليزية في جامعتي سامراء وتكريت، وقد استجابوا لاستبيان مكون من 19 فقرة بمقاييس ليكرت لقياس اتجاهاتهم (الأبعاد المعرفية والوجدانية والسلوكية) تجاه التعلم التشاركي عبر الإنترنت. تم التحقق من الخصائص السيكومترية للأداة المعدلة عن أداة(Ku et al.) ، وتم التحقق من أداء الإنتاج والتحقق من صحته عبر المنهجية الإحصائية لاختبار الخبراء في الموثوقية. كما هو موضح في الجدول (3)، بلغ المتوسط الكلي المركب للإدراك التشاركي 3.493 (بانحراف معياري 1.247)، والذي يقع ضمن فئة التحليل الإحصائي الوصفي "متوسط-مرتفع". ومع ذلك، لوحظ تناقض رئيسي في هذه البيانات: مستويات الترابط العالية على أسس اجتماعية وجدانية (درجات عالية لمشاركة المعلومات الشخصية بمتوسط حسابي 4.465، والثقة الشخصية بمتوسط حسابي 3.953) والتي تم تأكيدها عاطفيًا ولكن ليس من خلال ممارسة التفوق الوظيفي، مما يشير إلى انخفاض في تقدير المهام عبر مشاركة الخبرات المهنية (متوسط حسابي 2.52) وتكرار تواصلي منخفض جدًا بشكل عام (متوسط حسابي 2.74). إلى جانب الصراع المرتبط عادةً بغموض الأدوار، هناك أيضًا فقدان لجزء مما يجعل التشاركية تعاونية، ألا وهو الهدف، حيث يتشكل الغموض فيما يتعلق بالأهداف أيضًا. تشير هذه النتائج إلى أن وجود مناخ اجتماعي إيجابي لا يعني بالضرورة وجود بناء معرفي منتج عالٍ. وتشير نتائج الدراسة إلى ضرورة تبني تدخلات هيكلية دقيقة لتحديد الأدوار بوضوح، وتنظيم روتينيات شبه رسمية لتبادل المعرفة، وآليات منهجية للمساءلة من أجل تحويل رأس المال العلائقي إلى عمليات تعلم تشاركي جوهرية في السياقات العراقية لتعليم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية.

الكلمات المفتاحية :اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية ، العراق، التعلم التشاركي، التعلم عبر الإنترنت، التعلم التشاركي عبر الإنترنت .

1. Introduction

At least from the beginning of this century, the constant installation of digital technologies in most countries end up making a profound impact into teaching and learning. The cornerstone of this educational revolution includes collaborative learning, a classroom model where four walls of the physical world turned into an endless connected landscape — online. OCL is not wrangling of traditional group work with technology, but a new socioconstructivist based pedagogy where knowledge co-construction occurs over time through dialogue, some inquiry and negotiation of meaning in an online mediated community space (Harasim 2012). This represents a very resourceful academic context in which OCL offered productive affordances for English as a Foreign language (EFL) education, especially within an authentic communicative environment during which opportunities to negotiate linguistic form with peers and 21st century skills in digital literacies, critical thinking and intercultural communicative competence would be developed together (Kessler, 2018; Warschauer, 1997). Yet the impact of any teaching and learning innovation is always shaped by the view of its intended beneficiaries – students. Knowledge about student attitudes towards OCL is not just an abstract or research issue in the context of Iraqi EFL higher education: any potential (re)shift from rote, often lectured-based approaches to more engaging and student-centered approaches—supported by technology-enhanced learning paradigms that can bring language education back to life in the new post-conflict era—will literally depend on it.

The theoretical rationale for including OCL in EFL pedagogy is strong and well-supported. According to Vygotsky and his sociocultural theory of learning (1978), learning takes place on the social plane before being internalized, where the zone of proximal development (ZPD) represents that sweet spot in which a learner can accomplish more with guidance from experts or peers than they could alone. This process is best conducted through OCL environments, because they provide the architecture in which peer-to-peer scaffolding can be asynchronous and, importantly, it can be more intentional, more visible and potentially permanent than often-occurring classroom interactions (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). In addition, Swain (2000) has argued in his output hypothesis that language production must be in the second step of Second Language Acquisition because processing is more likely to occur at a syntactic level rather than just a semantic level. The processes of producing comprehensible output, as well as getting feedback and having to adjust their interlanguage are promoted in an online forum, chat or collaborative writing platform that can be amplified within a non-

threatening collaborative digital space. The structure of OCL itself, as described in Harasim's (2012) theory of online collaborative knowledge building, takes learners beyond reproductive learning to a process of idea generation, organization and intellectual convergence (a skill set that is crucial for tertiary-level language learners who must develop an ability to critique texts and ideas in their L2).

There has been a considerable amount of research conducted worldwide on computer-supported collaborative learning (CSCL) in EFL contexts, which has been characterised by multidimensional findings. Many studies support the possible benefits of OCL for learners as it has been shown to make them more autonomous, motivated and less anxious in a foreign language (Abrams, 2003; Sato & Ballinger, 2016). Many OCL platforms work asynchronously to afford a processing buffer within which learners can ponder their contributions and make them in no particular rush, relieving the immense pressure of face-to-face (F2F) interaction that may prove invaluable for shy or less high-proficiency students (Warschauer, 1996). In addition, collaborative tools such as wikis and Google Docs can induce a sense of co-authorship and shared audience that in turn lead to an increased focus on accuracy at the level of both language use and rhetorical design in writing tasks (Kessler, 2009; Li, 2018). However, this narrative of the positive is not universal.

This is precisely the recognition of situational contingency that places a need to examine student attitudes in an Iraqi EFL context. In the higher education sector of Iraqi universities, such an understanding of educational ends has led to a mainly transmissive, teacher-centered pedagogy (Al-Juboori & Al-Momen, 2016) where knowledge is seen as a storehouse thing that can be transmitted from one person to another by one-way flow between expert instructor and passive student. Think how much an uncritical application of rote memorization and a strong exam-orientation have been crowned above critical dialogue, participatory exchanges. While this established model has a rightful place in the history and culture, it may not be compatible with the communicative and interactive that skills call for better utilitarian English proficiency in the 21st century. At least since Mohammed (2020) discussed the gradual connection of Iraqi universities to mobile internet and social transmission networks (demand from children for an increasingly wide range of world knowledge economies), it is possible to say that there are first steps before modernisation and toward technology-enriched learning in Iraq, however not uniformly.

Following the tripartite model in social psychology, attitudes consist of three components: cognitive beliefs, affective feelings and behavioural predispositions towards an object (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). Of interest here is that the definition of a learner’s attitude towards OCL would include their beliefs perceived utility regarding learning a language using online collaboration, emotional reactions to collaborating online, and behavioral intention to actually collaborate. Those attitudes inevitably will be colored by an unusual conjunction of Iraqi realities. Chronic issues of disrupted electricity, services and banned devices create major sources of technological anxiety that adversely affect affective attitudes in the context of educational infrastructure affected by sanctions after conflicts (UNESCO, 2017). Students who are conditioned by rote-learning paradigms may in their heart of hearts believe that the teacher is the only legitimate source of knowledge, doubting the effectiveness of peers working together to solve problems; this epistemic belief pattern is culturally determined (Chan & Elliott, 2004). Alternatively, there may be a strong and positive pull of attitude. Online platforms may be viewed by a generation of Iraqis as a gateway to the outside world, an avenue for unrestrained expression, and access to members of a worldwide English-speaking and -learning community (Al-Khafaji, 2019).

Consequently, this study sits at the frontier between effective worldwide pedagogical practices and local contextual reality. The learner voice would not just be relevant but necessary in shaping Iraq at such a deep and complex route of reconstruction and level setting the within its system of education. To import Western-styled OCL models wholesale without consideration of how Iraqi EFL students envisioned their education, would amount to an instructional flop worthy of yet another (a rather Shirley Temple-ish) deficit narrative. So the aim of this paper is to explore these student attitudes as a source of rich evidence that will inform discussion for more culturally sensitive, hybrid and technology-embedded model for collaborative bilingual language learning. This study is dedicated to offer systematically a much-attended context-sensitive

perspective for the broader CALL literature exploring Iraqi EFL learner attitudes, emotions and intentions regarding online collaborative compensatory practice as well as offering some possible practical suggestions in order to pave the way for a more dialogic, engaging and successful future of English language teaching in Iraq. This study will answers this question, through the following:

1. How do Iraqi EFL University level students Perform in Online Collaborative Learning in classroom Practice?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Principles of Online Collaborative Learning in Teaching Languages

Online Collaborative Learning (OCL) is based on socioconstructivist epistemology, which corresponds to the view that knowledge is not an independent transmittable object of interest, but a social construct shaped through cultural tool-mediated interact. The best representative of collectivist discourse is that of Vygotsky (1978) who, in his sociocultural theory (SCT), argues that all higher order cognitive processes are essentially social processes from without to within. This is the ZDP or Zone of Proximal Development, and it defines what a learner can do unassisted versus with an instructor/ more capable peer. OCL environments serve as a technical representation of the ZPD, with asynchronous discussion forums, synchronous chat or collaborative document editors serving as an extended more equitable and amendable space to negotiate meaning and mutual scaffolding (Lantolf & Thorne 2006; Lund 2008). For peer assistance, digital provides a clear and documented trail of helping conversations to review and many possible language opportunity.

Probably more pertinent to the sociocultural view of social interaction, Swain's (2000, 2005) output hypothesis and its recent reformulation as the type of "collaborative dialogue" required in OCL situations received a psycholinguistic justification for OCL in EFL contexts. For Swain (1985), however, the very nature of language production pushes learners from semantic processing which is characteristic of comprehension to syntactic processing that ensures correct and coherent production. Learners find themselves facing communicative breakdown, see gaps in their interlanguage, test hypotheses about linguistic forms and also reflect metalinguistically on their output in collaborative task. This method of “languaging” is heightened in OCL contexts where the more permanent and written quality of much digital communication gives a higher cognitive threshold for processing time and choice (Kessler, 2009; Swain & Watanabe, 2012).

At a national level, Harasim has also attempted to create pedagogy-specific theorisation of innovation using the Online Collaborative Knowledge Building model (Harasim 2012),where collaborative learning approaches are synthesised from these strands of cognitive and social cognition. According to Harasim (1990), OCL is a divergence from traditional instructivist models in which the experience of knowledge takes a three-phase intellectual event: generating input ideas; organizing input ideas; and intellectual convergence. The assumption in EFL circles is that while vocabulary and grammar rules are memorised through imitation, learning occurs as one begins to use the language; discursively, critically, utilising resources of both memory and imagination to seek solutions, take positions (citing literature), co-write texts. It is inherently conversational and communicative, as learners must express, defend, and refine their ideas in the interacting language where they simultaneously develop both knowledge of the language itself and skills in higher-order thinking (Garrison, Anderson & Archer 2001).

2.2 Empirical Evidence from around the Globe on Student Attitudes Toward OCL

Comparatively, internationally, research into students’ perceptions of OCL presents a more diverse but somewhat contradictory picture. This literature addresses some of the best-known themes, for example, documenting positive affective and cognitive outcomes in collaborative digital learning. One of the first studies to combine face-to-face and electronic discussion (Warschauer, 1996) found computer mediation favored less hierarchical styles of participation; students previously shy about speaking in CMC classes wrote more frequently and at a higher lexical complexity than they did orally. The finding has been repeatedly

replicated with scholars suggesting that lack of social cues and real-time anxiety relief through asynchronous communication lead to this (Abrams, 2003; Satar & Özdener, 2008). This is especially likely to be the case for language learners who are apprehensive about making mistakes in their new L2 identity and thus have the additional affective cost of either perceived anonymity or distance.

Collaborative web-based tools such as wikis and Google Docs have been the subject of much scholarly attention in the field of second language writing. Li (2018) conducted a meta-analysis on the impact of computer-mediated collaborative writing and suggested that students show positive attitudes regarding their learning experiences, especially with respect to perceived gains in grammatical accuracy, vocabulary acquisition, and audience awareness. Editors often find that learners feel a stronger communal ownership of the text and an appreciation for the multi-vocal feedback built into collaborative process (Kessler, 2009; Storch, 2013). But this warm welcome comes with some caveats. This same body of research also pinpoint persistent drivers of anti-social attitude formation, most prominently a lack of equal participation—colloquially referred to as “free-riding” or “social loafing”—fostering resentment over imbalanced workloads (Capdeferro & Romero, 2012; Kreijns, Kirschner, & Jochems, 2003). Moreover, students who are used to receiving authoritative and unequivocal instructor feedback typically question the quality and accuracy of peer comments—a cognitive appraisal that can erode their confidence in the collaborative process (Guardado & Shi, 2007; Ware & O’Dowd, 2008). The intersection of technological mediation, social dynamics and pedagogical design thus makes attitude formation a highly situated construct.

One concrete question that should be asked in this research domain is regarding the influence of cultural factors on students' openness towards OCL. Previous research in cross-cultural psychology has identified students from collective culture, which places high value on group cohesion and teacher-centered power dynamics, as less ready to participate in open exchange and peer critique central to OCL (Hofstede, 2001; Nguyen, Terlouw & Pilot (2006). For instance, Zhang and Kenny (2010) examined Chinese EFL students' perceptions of participating in online discussion, and explained that whilst they saw an opportunity to practice the language via synchronous discussions, a reluctance to disagree with group members publicly was because this constituted 'face threatening' behaviour. In contrast, Ku et al. (2011) show how, if well designed and facilitated for OCL tasks (e.g., Middle East), student attitudes were very positive, viewing the online space as offering a liberating context of intellectual risk-taking. The conflict between institutions oriented around cultural scripts associated with higher education and the substantive changes lent by new modes of articulation is perhaps most plainly manifest in a spatial milieu like that of Iraq where even discourses of nationally-influenced models for education collide with more overtly globalizing vectors of digital culture.

2.3 The Iraqi Educational and Technological Context

For decades of political turbulence, sanctions and war, education in Iraq — once the envy of the Arab world — had haemorrhaged badly. One of the far-reaching results of these changes have been a systematic intellectual insulation, which may be described in the terms of Alwan (2004) and Harb (2016), where an almost autocratic top-down context for pedagogy predominated. The instructor stands at the top of the epistemic hierarchy where they hand down knowledge, students are described as passive consumers of that same knowledge (the textbook adopted for a class is seen as an arbiter of authoritative knowledge and performance on exams one of the most important outcome measures. The practices of inquiry-based learning, deliberative dialogue and collective problem-solving — the very basis of OCL — have been sidelined resulting in what Freire (1970) argued as “banking model” of education. Consequently, this may also be an additional reason for why simply creating a passive-rewarding environment draws Iraqi EFLers to highly rationalised paradigms which reflect the perceived value and efficacy of experiential, peer-driven learning pathways (Cognitive Attitude Theory; Eagly & Chaiken).

This conservative institutional culture coexists with the omnipresent influence of digital technology within Iraqs public sphere. Access to the Internet and mobile telephony advanced rapidly since 2003 and social media (Facebook, Telegram, WhatsApp and Instagram) became embedded in the socio-sphere in Iraq

regardless of generation but especially targets for youth respondents (Al-Khafaji 2019; Mohammed 2020). This generation has been described by Prensky (2001) as, "digital natives", including intuitively sophisticated and inherently more informal collaborative digital literacies directly related to an unparalleled exposure to social portal sites, the natural home of many years practice in individual news dissemination through a blog style. It is added this can be seen as a larger domain in public life for many youth in Iraq who say things they could not in the constrained reality of what they experience around them (Kadhum, 2021).

In addition, the non-negotiable elements of technology access in Iraq pertained to student characteristics impacting their attitudes toward use congruent with Davis's (1989) Technology Acceptance Model with perceived ease of use identified an essential antecedent for behavioral intention to use. Although a lot has changed since then, many Iraqi students continue to confront an ongoing situation where the quality of infrastructure is patchy at best; for example, through dilapidated running of electricity provision poorly functioning internet networks (high prices, if any)—with smartphones largely providing the interface into this digital world (UNESCO,2017). When such OCL platforms and tasks are accessed on mobile devices through unreliable connections, they become extremely frustrating inside domestic laptop-silled ecosystems constituting the Western university entering its 3rd academic decade shaping negative affective attitudes. Similarly, Al-Azawei et al. (2017) identified infrastructural barriers (e.g., lack of Internet access, technical support and teacher readiness skills for e-learning in Iraq) as some of the strongest predictors of learners' dissatisfaction with learning and dropout in higher education. Thus in any examination of attitudes it will be necessary to disentangle the cognitive evaluation of OCL as a pedagogical approach from the affective frustration which arising from its technological implementation within an imposed limited context.

2.4 The Importance of Online Collaborative Learning in Classroom Practice

Online Collaborative Learning (OCL) is a pedagogical model, in which learners engage collaboratively and collectively with their peers to solve problems, accomplish tasks and co-construct knowledge through continuous dialogue in an ecosystem of shared inquiry (Harasim, 2012). It is neither ancillary nor supplementary to all that each new classroom practice demands, but a fundamental overhaul of how we learn in classes, making learning practices fit for purpose as we passively tumble into the twenty-first century social and technological landscape. OCL is important from both the perspective of its capacity to operationalize socioconstructivist learning theory, develop real communicative competence and transversal skills, and increase democratic participation in classrooms.

Thus, the most important aspect of OCL is its direct implementation of Vygotskian sociocultural theory in everyday classroom practice. Learning is essentially social, arising from interactions between individuals, and later appropriated as mental or cognitive competence (Vygotsky 1978). The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)—which can be understood as the space between what a learner can independently do and with some support from an expert or peer—is where instruction works best. OCL builds a structural architecture that allows one ZPD to be activated in multiple directions, continuously, something impossible with teacher-frontal classrooms. In async forums, collaborative docs & synchronous chat platforms learners engage in reciprocal scaffolding where peers provide contingent support, model strategies and co-create explanations (Lantolf & Thorne 2006). In an important sense, the digital medium makes this scaffolding visible (but also permanent and revisable), converting transitory classroom talk into artifacts that can be archived, reflected on and consolidated (Lund, 2008). Without OCL, peer scaffolding is mostly incidental and hidden; with it, scaffolding is a design-driven ubiquitous attribute of the learning environment.

The mechanism of collaborative dialogue enhances this sociocognitive significance. Swain (2000, 2005) showed that language acquisition promotes when learners engage in joint work by using language to negotiate meaning and solve linguistic problems or gaps collectively: this process is called “languaging”. In OCL contexts, especially peer-writing environments, learners need help explicitly articulating their metalinguistic reasoning behind negotiating how to use words, structure syntax, and organize rhetorical arguments (Kessler, 2009). Which makes language both the means and the material of collaborative inquiry, creating the kind of

deep analytic processing that sustains durable acquisition. Storch (2013) cites numerous examples of this in the literature, with collaborative writing tasks leading to higher amounts of grammatical and lexical sophistication than individual composition -- because composing collaboratively constrains our knowledge and helps process it external into negotiation. What this means with respect to OCL is that it defines a structured context for an interaction which is cognitively demanding (more on why this matters in a later post) and which frames acquisition-rich opportunities such that they are difficult to replicate consistently in oral group work.

Second, OCL matters because it has the potential to create authentic communicative language use, which is a fundamental goal of Communicative Language Teaching that has remained persistently out-of-reach in traditional classrooms. Traditional EFL teaching is often typified by contrived patterns of interaction — initiation-response-evaluations and display questions where the interlocutor knows the answer already (Nunan, 2004). In sum, OCL challenges this faux nature by conducting the reverse back towards genuine communicative needs in the classroom. When learners are learning with each other to produce a common digital product—whether that be a class blog, self-paced multi-media presentation, collaborative research report—the target language is not an abstract subject matter any longer but the pragmatic mean needed achieve some objective they've collaboratively found worth achieving. In addition, OCL supports students in traversing the bridge from formal literacy taught in classrooms to that exercised by young people more generally in their everyday lives via digital multimodal literacies while also developing transferziehungen skills and ccompetence that will serve learners well beyond school (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011).

The third important dimension resides in OCL's inherent nurturing of 21st-century transversal skills. Collaboration, communication, critical thinking, and creativity are recognized by the Partnership for 21st Century Learning as core competencies needed in academia, work and civic life (Trilling & Fadel, 2009). OCL is not a tool for teaching these competencies as separate content – it is a pedagogy that necessarily engages and develops them. In the online context where students need to state their ideas clearly and negotiate roles/responsibilities, manage conflicts, merge disparate perspectives into meaningful products and give and receive critical feedback (Dillenbourg, 1999), this can be even more challenging. These skills are high level interpersonal and cognitive abilities developed over time only when success is peer to peer working in organized cooperative settings. According to Sennett (2012) the ability to cooperate is not a natural quality, it is a craft that must be cultivated through practice and OCL provides the necessary rehearsal space for this vital craft. Finally, OCL also fosters important digital literacy skills as students plan and use platforms, critically analyze internet content, and incorporate multimodal materials which prepares them to adapt for the digitally mediated academic and career environments (Godwin-Jones, 2018).

Fourthly, but in no way or shape last is the degree of democratization over OCL has transformed classroom participation. In an era in which these oral-interaction classrooms are generally preferred, the more extroverted, self-assured learners appear to be facilitated while reflective students and those who experience comparatively high levels of foreign language anxiety (Horwitz et al, 1986) are largely silenced. Simultaneously, OCL also shifts epistemic authority from teacher-to-learner and shares it with learner to learner and the learning community (understood as a group of learners studying together under the guidance of a mentor), which fosters learner agency (Garrison & Akyol, 2015) by helping student experiences shift from passively consuming materials to actively participating in courses through question asking, explanation and critiques as contributions to course content (Benson, 2011).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study was quantitative, with a cross-sectional survey research design developed to systematically explore the attitudes of Iraqi EFL students in their classroom practices towards Online Collaborative Learning (OCL). The cross-sectional method was appropriate as it allows for data collection from a target population at one specific point in time (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), detailing descriptive and associational perceptions of

two prevailing attitudes and their constituent dimensions. The epistemological orientation of the study is post-positivist, based on an assumption that student attitudes are held internally but can be quantified and interpreted through valid and reliable instruments to permit generalizable claims about the target population (Phillips & Burbules, 2000). The quantitative paradigm was chosen to allow for comparative measurement of the cognitive, affective, and behavioral components of attitude (Eagly and Chaiken 1993) over a large sample with statistical analysis possible across these attitudinal dimensions as well relevant demographic/and contextual variables.

3.2 Population and Sample

The participants of this study were undergraduate Iraqi EFL students studying in English language institutes at public universities. The accessible population (in the case of this study were) students from the Department of English at two major public higher education institutions: University of Samarra and University of Tikrit, located in Salah al-Din Governorate. Universities were selected purposively for several reasons: mainly, the comparability of this institutional structure (research), student demographic profile and curriculum design; the fact that they have adopted blended learning initiatives, giving students some experience using online learning environments; and logistical ease to access researchers themselvesâ€“a vital issue, given infrastructure and security issues in Iraqj(Al-Azawei et al., 201736).

A non-probability convenience sampling method was employed. Probably for statistical generalization, probability sampling is the better option; however, convenience sampling has gained acceptance in education research whenever random assignment is impractical, and the purpose of the study is to discover preliminary patterns and test theoretical relationships within an easily accessible group (Gay, Mills & Airasian 2012). The sample consisted of 126 male and female students(58 University of Samarra,68 University of Tikrit). Participants were taken from Years 2, 3 and 4 of their undergraduate programmes to ensure all respondents had undertaken at least one year of university-level English study and been exposed to any form of technology-mediated instruction (formal or informal). It was decided to exclude first-year students, since their newness to university life might not be solidified enough for them to produce reflective attitudinal data. Demographic information on the participants was recorded in terms of sex, year of study and self-reported experience with online learning platforms to allow for comparative analysis between sub-groups.

3.3 Instrumentation

Structured self-administered questionnaire. These instruments were modified from previous validated measure (Ku and Tseng, 2016; Akarasriworn et al., 2013) related to collaboration factors, teamwork satisfaction, low engagement students in online collaborative learning. The original instrument was developed based on a coherent theoretical framework that integrated the principles of cooperative learning theory with social knowledge theory, and psychometric properties (construct validity and internal consistency reliability) were established for a shortened version using exploratory factor analysis followed by confirmatory factor analysis. Response to each item was measured using a five-points Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The choice of a five-point scale was based on standard and best practice in educational attitudinal research, where it is suggested that five point scales represent the best compromise between measurement precision and the cognitive load required to respond (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2010).

The questionnaire was translated into Arabic from English while spanning the appropriate target population, using a backward metric (Brislin, 1970) so as to ensure linguistic validity. The first quotation was translated from the English version into Arabic by a bilingual applied linguistics expert. The Arabic version was subsequently back-translated into English independently by another bilingual expert who had no previous knowledge of the original instrument. Equivalence between semantic concepts of the two English versions (original and back-translated) were checked by a three-member panel among EFL faculty members. Articles were discussed and resolved by consensus, with only minor lexical changes made to 9 items to ensure cultural appropriateness but not altering the meaning of any item. We prepared the third and final bilingual version by

constructing each item to show both English and Arabic next to each other so that respondents could cross check if local or national reference help clarify an answer.

3.4. Validity and Reliability

Content validity established using a systematic expert review. A panel of six experts in the areas of applied linguistics, educational technology and psychometrics reviewed the 19-item questionnaire that underwent adaptation. The panel was required to rate each item based on its clarity, appropriateness for the construct of OCL attitudes and suitability for Iraqi EFL context. Some adjustments to the wording of three items with the intention of improving contextual relevance were made based on their feedback, but without semantic change. Item-Content Validity Index (I-CVI) was calculated, and all retained items showed to have an I-CVI value >0.83 which is above the threshold of 0.78 recommended for panels consisting of six or more experts (Polit, Beck & Owen, 2007). The scale was piloted with 20 EFL students at an institution not involved in the main study sample to assess for face validity. Pilot respondents administered the questionnaire and then participated in a short cognitive debriefing, which asked them to identify items they view as ambiguous, confusing, or culturally inappropriate. Neither factor identification nor cognitive debriefing revealed any serious problems, thus confirming that the instrument was clear and understandable to the beneficiary population.

To test construct validity, exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was performed on the data from the primary sample (N = 126). To assess the appropriateness of the data for factor analysis, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy and Bartlett's test of sphericity were computed. Indicators with eigenvalues greater than 1.0 were identified by the principal component analysis (varimax rotation). Confirmatory factor analysis further interpreted the factor structure to confirm that the items aligned with hypothesized three dimensions of attitude. Any item that had a factor loading below 0.40 or which cross-loaded significantly onto multiple factors was also candidates for removal (Field, 2018).

Reliability was evaluated by calculating Cronbach's alpha coefficient. Reliability coefficients were calculated for the entire 19-item scale as well as independently for each of the three subscales. Consistent with guidelines for social sciences research (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994), a Cronbach's alpha value of >.70 was established as the cut-off to deem full confidence in the data. reliability of original instrument reported by Ku et al The psychometric properties of the total scale of (2013) was 0.96, on which the present study attempted to verify whether the adapted version preserved an acceptable level of validity and reliability in the Iraqi EFL context.

3.5. Data Collection Procedure

Ethical approval for the study was secured from the institutional review boards of University of Samarra and University of Tikrit before data collection. Next, administrative permissions obtained from the respective Department Heads. The data collection was conducted in the first semester of the 2025-2026 academic year. To make sure that we had high response rates, the questionnaire was administered in paper and pencil form during regularly scheduled class sessions wherein procedural questions could be answered directly by research staff. We chose a paper-based format instead of an online survey to avoid introducing non-response bias, since access to and proficiency with the internet can be unequal across socially and economically disadvantaged populations (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2014).

At each administration, the researchers were present. A standardized oral script was given in Arabic explaining the research aim, details regarding voluntary participation, anonymity and confidentiality of responses, and right to withdrawal without any academic penalty. Respondents were informed that completion of the questionnaire constituted implied consent. Procedural questions—they occur in choosing survey filling procedure—were answered by the researchers; about meaning of item, however, substantive questions were not raised to avoid influencing subjects' responses. The survey had an approximate completion time of 15 to 20 minutes. Questionnaires were immediately completed, returned in sealed envelopes, transported to the

researchers' office for entering into a database and stored in a secure locked cabinet which only the research team had access to.

4.0 Findings and Discussion of Results

4.1 Questionnaire Results for Online Collaborative Learning

The mean, standard deviation and weighted percentage are descriptive statistics used to assess the level at which the trait of collaboration is perceived as being high or low. The overall composite mean and item scores suggest strengths alongside useful development work in relation to team collaboration.

Table 1.

Students' response to the Online Collaborative Learning Questionnaire Items

Items	English Description	Mean ($\bar{x}$)	Std Dev (σ)	Pct. Weight (%)	Level
1	My team develops clear collaborative patterns to increase team learning efficiency.	3.78	1.031	75.59%	Moderate-High
2	My team trusts each other and works toward the same goal.	3.953	1.112	79.06%	Moderate-High
3	My team members clearly know their roles during the collaboration.	3.039	1.178	60.79%	Moderate
4	My team sets clear goals and establishes working norm.	3.173	1.235	63.46%	Moderate
5	My team members reply to all responses in a timely manner.	3.591	1.15	71.81%	Moderate-High
6	My team members communicate with each other frequently.	2.74	1.255	54.80%	Low
7	I trust each team member can complete his/her work on time.	3.22	1.133	64.41%	Moderate
8	My team has an efficient way to track the edition of documents.	3.638	1.159	72.76%	Moderate-High
9	My team is receiving feedback from each other.	3	1.321	60.00%	Moderate
10	Communicating with team members regularly helps me to understand the team project better.	3.614	1.032	72.28%	Moderate-High
11	My team members encourage open communication with each other.	3.882	1.179	77.64%	Moderate-High
12	My team members communicate in a courteous tone.	3.78	1.168	75.59%	Moderate-High
13	My team members share culture information to know each other better.	3.559	1.166	71.18%	Moderate-High

14	My team members share personal information to know each other better.	4.465	0.898	89.29%	High
15	Getting to know one another in my team allows me to interact with teammates more efficiently.	4.016	1.113	80.31%	High
16	My team members share their professional expertise.	2.52	1.308	50.39%	Lowest
17	The support from the instructor helps my team to reduce anxiety among team members.	3.244	1.32	64.88%	Moderate
18	The instructor acts as a referee when our members cannot seem to resolve differences.	3.583	1.144	71.65%	Moderate-High
19	My team is receiving guidance on the group project from the instructor.	3.567	1.131	71.34%	Moderate-High
Overall	All 19 Items Combined	3.493	1.247	69.85%	Moderate-High

The mean value of the nineteen elements (3.493, 1.247) composite score comprised 69.85% of the total weight for perceived teamwork collaboration (medium to high level). This indicates that while identifying work components is beneficial, there are significant differences between task-oriented work and the way social and emotional exchanges operate. However, a more in depth look at the figures shows that relationships and other social/emotional traits are why the team really shines. The highest mean ($\bar{x}$ = 4.465, 89.29% "High") and standard deviation σ = 0.898 was on Item 14: My team members exchange details about their personal lives to get to know each other indicating clear agreement that this sharing of personal knowledge is part and parcel of practice, which together with the almost similar high score recorded by item 15 linking interpersonal information to interactional power directly ($\bar{x}$ = 4.01680.31% "High"). The average scores state that the team has developed safe and positive space with cordial communication (Item 12, $\bar{x}$ = 3.793) and trust towards common goal (item 2, $\bar{x}$ = 3.953).

This comprehensive sense of comfort with one's peers is paradoxically attended to by many barriers to the core processes that directly facilitate and promote collaborative work. The worst rating in mean score by the experts was on item 16 professional expertise sharing ($\bar{x}$ = 2.52, 50.39%, "lowest"). This other important area (item 6, $\bar{x}$ =2.74, 54.80) weakens the basis for substantive knowledge exchange with poor general communication as the second weakest domain identified. The data pattern is a reflection of how team members are inclined towards personal connect but there has been hardly any discussion professionally or sustained communicative interactions. This detachment is backed by ambiguity in a working model; nevertheless, role vagueness (item 3) is an entirely separate problem, with a mean that is low and also a standard deviation that is high ($\bar{x}$ = 3.039, σ = 1.178), meaning disagreement on who carries out exactly what by whom. Similarly, the item 4 for creating goals and working norms at a "Moderate" level ($\bar{x}$=3.173 respectively). A high use of structured, expert-based communication combined with a low-trust friendly environment means team climate is likely geared toward preserving harmony in lieu of accountability and meaningful task conflict. The instructor, as defined (measured) by the students in item 18 is a referee ($\bar{x}$ = 3.583), and as shown through item19 who guides ($\bar{x}$ = 3.567), of course on its own external help cannot solve fundamental internal problem like sharing and defining roles regarding continuous interaction communication in every other word achieve by using solutions offered externally or internally, any way both have similar outcomes Gehlbach et al. So, the importance of team bonding (as we know that strong social ties exist) does not mean further team-bonding per se should be the main intervention but rather articulating clear structures on knowledge sharing and formal roles, as well a minimum bar of how much task focused communication

must take place to transform what we can agree is a considerable amount of social capital into some valuable delivery.

4.2 Discussion of Results

This overall composite mean of 3.493 (SD = 1.247, percentage weight = 69.85%) shows that the level of perceived team collaboration amongst members is at "Moderate-High" which suggests that fundamental collaborative mechanisms are already installed but also highlights areas in these teams where strengths and concerns coexist during working together moderated HIGH to MODERATE degree Results aligned with the multidimensional nature of teamwork, where large discrepancies can exist in performance across socio-emotional and task-based facets of teamwork (Salas et al., 2015). A closer analysis of the 19 items reveals a team that has built fine relationships in the department but is less effective in critical structured, task-oriented processes needed for academic achievement.

The highlight finding has to do with the fact that this is a team strong on one of the core socio-emotional constructs in building relationships. Item 14 "My team members share personal information to get to know each other better" had the highest mean ($\bar{x}$ = 4.465, SD = 0.898) from all items and had a "High" response level besides item 15. This high level of agreement around personal sharing and the acknowledgement that learning from others can provide a significant gain in efficiency (Item 15, $\bar{x}$ = 4.016; item tag "organisation") fully backs the theory based on social presence generating group cohesion Garrison et al. Swan et al. (2000) employing the concept of social presence—the participation of personalities in the community—argue that it is a key factor to guarantee gratifying educational context. Unity based on climate of goodwill (Item 2, mean = 3.953) and sense of communication sustained by respect (Item 12, mean = 3·80) seem to be part of the bases for psychological wellbeing willingness to engage [37]. An environment that encourages members to be their true selves is highly valued, and it acts as a strong basis for effective collaboration.

However, the data tell a somewhat surprising story: even with such a relational power base and an atmosphere of consideration, it still did not create successful collaborations at work. The "lowest" team scored the highest mean on all items related to providing adequate exchange of professional experiences (Item 16, average = 2.52, 50.39%, $\alpha \geq 0.05$). It is quite alarming, for it contradicts the very principles of cooperative learning based on ideas and skills learnt (Vygotsky, 1978). The low rating of items (average across instances) shows in the second worst-rated item (Item 6, average = 2.74, "low"). Woven together, these findings suggest an amiable group but one that lacks the rich intellectual interactions necessary for serious scholarship. This is starkly different with a much better social climate but relatively lower cognitive engagement aka "lost process" or the group's ability to do work not only down scales the syngergistic effect (Steiner, 1972). A high SD (SD = 1.308) of perceptions of expertise sharing indicate that the perception is not uniform, where some members may strive to contribute their intellectual efforts, but others may social loafing (Latané et al., 1979).

This interpretation is further supported by the "Moderate" ratings for role clarification (Item 3, $\bar{x}$ = 3.039) and goal-setting (Item 4, $\bar{x}$ = 3.173). These scores indicate structural ambiguities in the team operational model. A team will rarely move beyond polite conversation to coordinated, interdependent work without well defined individual roles and clear, co-created objectives. According to Katzenbach and Smith (1993), a performance challenge combined with the commitment to a common approach is what makes a team high performing, and specifically emphasizes that this approach depends on how the role of each participant in the process has been defined. The results indicate that the team members are engaged socially, which may be replacing, or even hiding in this case, formal operational structure. Instructor as guide and referee (Items 18 & 19, $\bar{x} > 3.56$) perceived positively but the team internal deficits on expertise sharing/role definition reflect a group who relied too heavily on external arbitration vs self-regulated task execution. This fits with findings that instructors in collaborative environments should move from direct managers to agents of empowerment allowing teams to manage their own processes (Johnson & Johnson, 2009). At its heart, this means substantial, structural interventions – e.g. enforced documentation and knowledge sharing practices, assigned

rotating roles and team charters to turn the teams abundant social capital into quantifiable collaborative output and authentic knowledge co-construction.

5.0 Conclusion

The aim of this study was to assess how team work operates in an academic environment showing that socio-emotional and task-oriented group are complexly inter related. They provide clear evidence that although the social environment in which the team members interact seems to be one characterized by high levels of self-disclosure, intimacy, trust and politeness the resulting teams still fail them on task-related performance. This implies that social cohesion was more important than substantive academic debate and formal accountability within a team culture. These results are both theoretically and practically important. This work demonstrates that teamwork is a multifaceted construct, and although social climate is an important predictor of collaboration outcomes there are additional features other than the quality of social climate within teams associated with successful teamwork. Such create separation dues increase the risk of process loss: time spent bonding may not translate itself into collaborative cognitive co-construction. This leads you to the single most important recommendation that must be advanced: facilitators and team leaders need to push their teams from a facilitative role to actively deploying formalised charters, litmus roles for rotating members and rules of engagement for knowledge sharing. Future work that attempts to understand this phenomenon would benefit from a qualitative method involving (perhaps) extensive interviews of those with knowledge who are reluctant to take advantage of (very socially comfortable) settings for doing so. The real challenge is not to dissipate this irradiating social capital, but rather to consciously channel it into a formal process that can transform an amicable circle into a productive high-performance team generating knowledge.

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