

The Effectiveness of Collaborative Teaching and Learning and Engaging Students as Partners on English Language Teaching in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract—This paper looks at the effectiveness of Collaborative Teaching and Learning (CTL) strategies in increasing students' satisfaction in their learning outcomes, experiences, and achievements. The main strategy addressed in this paper is engaging Students as Partners in the CTL. Student engagement correlates with positive learning experiences and outcomes for students. 'Students as Partners' principles and approaches are relevant to many aspects of enhancement and innovation in curriculum and pedagogy, particularly in Higher Education. While this may not be a novel or new idea in the West, many countries in Asia and the Middle East have yet to incorporate collaborative approaches in the classrooms. As such, this review hopes to shed light on the possibilities and advantages of engaging learners in aspects that in a traditional classroom, the role that only educators and teachers take on. This paper also explores the potential issues, challenges, and further work required in the application of CTL in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom in Saudi Arabia.

Index Terms—teaching, learning, English language, students, Saudi Arabia

I. INTRODUCTION

Engaging learners and teachers concurrently in English Language Teaching is arguably one of the most important issues facing higher education in the 21st century (Healey et al., 2014). It is important to reflect and distill the current context, underlying factors, and principles for future work on Collaborative Teaching and Learning (CTL). This term, broadly defined by Smith and MacGregor (1992) as the cooperative use of various approaches in education by teachers and students, has long been associated with a low-threat and comfortable learning environment for students (Pattanpichet, 2011). Such an environment would, *prima facie*, result in a learner that is more relaxed and less anxious and should improve English Language Acquisition. Another concept introduced in the paper is the act of engaging students as partners in the teaching and learning arena. Therefore, this means that students are not just seen as the receiver of information, but they have a stake in producing, developing, and modifying the curriculum, teaching and learning approaches, and more. The aims of this paper are: to identify the motivations and rationales for CTL, propose a conceptual model for exploring the use of CTL in Saudi Arabia, outline how the development of this model may guide and sustain the practice in ELT in Saudi Arabia and identify possible challenges and tensions inherent to CTL, and offer suggestions to teachers and institutions for addressing these.

Although research on CTL has been well documented, there has not been in-depth research in relation to the use of CTL for English Language Acquisition in Saudi Arabia. This paper aims to address this gap. Notwithstanding the positive outcomes such as reduced student anxieties and increased engagement noted in various research papers (Pattanpichet, 2011; Chen et al., 2021; Sousa et al., 2019) with regards to CTL, Jeong et. al. (2019) notes that class-wide CTL may not result in the desired outcome of knowledge acquisition under certain circumstances. It is highlighted that CTL may also cause a heightened level of stress and correspondingly result in an adverse learning experience or outcome. These would be covered in the later section under 'potential challenges and tensions'.

Despite the large expenditure, priority, and effort accorded by the Saudi Arabian government to ELA in Saudi Arabia over the years, there leaves much room for improvement related to the general standard of English in Saudi Arabia (Al-Johani, 2009; Fareh, 2010; Khan, 2011; Alrashidi & Phan, 2015). In this regard, an overview of the difficulties of ELA in Saudi Arabia will be briefly discussed in this paper. However, the purpose of this paper is to consider the potential application and issues of the CTL methods in the acquisition of English in Saudi Arabia.

English Language Acquisition and Teaching in Saudi Arabia: A Brief History

English language acquisition and teaching in Saudi Arabia has progressed quite significantly from when it was first introduced in the 1930s where factors such as Saudi Arabian culture, community, first language (Arabic), and religion led to a resistance in the acquisition of English (Alrabai, 2018). In light of the government's position to steer the Saudi Arabian economy towards a more all-rounded economy comparable to developed countries (Barnawi & Al-Hawsawi, 2017) the corresponding transition educational policies resulted in a four and a half times increase in the number of universities from 8 in 2001 to 36 in 2015 (Alshahrani, 2016). This would mean that the number of people who would have received English Language Education at the tertiary level could have increased in a similar proportion if the

English language was taught by the English Department of these Universities.

Notwithstanding the aforementioned progress and increased acceptance of English in Saudi Arabia, the key challenges that Saudi Arabian learners of English face include: 1) first language interference – technical differences between Arabic and English (Rababah, 2005); 2) cultural influences – misconstrued notion that the learning of English may result in a dilution of Saudi culture (Al-Nasser, 2015); 3) unfavorable English teaching and learning practices – e.g. using Arabic to teach English (Alhawsawi, 2013); 4) a lack of experiential exposure to English – limited opportunity to practice English (Khan, 2011); and 5) foreign language anxiety – situational anxiety as a result of foreign language acquisition (Woodrow, 2006).

This paper seeks to investigate how CTL may help to overcome or partially mitigate some of the above challenges that Saudi Arabian learners of English face.

II. ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING: AN OVERVIEW

A. *What Is Collaborative Teaching and Learning (CTL)?*

Frameworks and definitions of CTL have been developed and discussed in various papers over time. Häkkinen et al. (2017) broadly construct CL as the use of social skills and the commitment to coordinated work with co-learners, and further breaks it down to 1) collaborating to learn; 2) learning to collaborate, and 3) learning to teach whilst applying collaborative learning approaches. On the other hand, Vygotsky (1978), in one of the initial iterations of CL, defined it as a construct of social constructivism, where he emphasized “the collaborative nature of learning by the construction of knowledge through social negotiation”. A more modern definition of CTL involves students working as teams to discuss and problematize real-life situations. To illustrate this, the instructor or tutor and the learner start by engaging in understanding and mastering the processes linked to the intended learning outcomes in order to succeed in authentic contexts as well as from the education perspective (van Schalkwyk, 2015). It emphasizes student-centered learning and relational practices to their fullest extent. Some important concepts related to student-centered teaching and learning include encouraging student-faculty contact, cooperation among students, and active learning. This can be facilitated through giving timely feedback, focused time-based tasks, and effective two-way communication of expectations of learning goals.

Engagement through partnership is also crucial to understanding the collaborative aspects of ELT. This paper will use the term partnership congruent with collaboration and they may be used interchangeably. Viewing students as partners is one effective way to structure the body of education. This concept interweaves assessment and feedback, flexible pedagogies, internationalization and retention, and success (Healey et al., 2014). The investment in students with the power to co-create forms the root of this partnership. Traditionally, students learn passively by waiting for input from the instructor, learn through textbooks or worksheets and the tutors are responsible for the learning taking place in the classroom. It is also examination-driven and rote learning, which emphasizes what the educator hopes to achieve. However, van Schalkwyk (2015) argues that active learning is more sustainable and has more positive long-term results because active learners prepare themselves for independent learning, interact with authentic problems, and constructively engage with materials, methods, technology, and equipment. Student-centered learning also means that the learners take responsibility for their learning, critically think about the problem, actively learn with their peers, and constantly reflect on the learning process.

Despite the flexibility CTL seems to be, there is structure to regulate the interaction within student groups and encourage cognitive, social, and emotional development necessary for deep learning. Through co-creation and construction of knowledge and planned activities for individuals, they acquire and apply content knowledge and develop crucial skills through collaborating with others (Johnson, 2009).

B. *The Conceptual Model for Exploring the Use of CTL in Saudi Arabia*

The conceptual model, as constructed by Healey, Flint & Harrington (2014), focuses on four interrelated methods of engaging students in partnership, namely:

- learning, teaching and assessment;
- subject-based research and inquiry;
- scholarship of teaching and learning;
- curriculum design and pedagogic consultancy.

Each of these four areas will be discussed in turn in the next few sections. The conceptual frameworks which have been developed for each area will also be identified, and case studies of initiatives that have applied the ideas will be presented. To this must be added at the center of the model the partnership learning communities, which emphasizes the processes by which the four different kinds of partnership operate. These are discussed in detail in the following chapter. The wider topic of student engagement aims to emphasize the point that engagement through collaboration is a form of student engagement, but not all forms of student engagement are forms of collaboration (Healey et al., 2014).

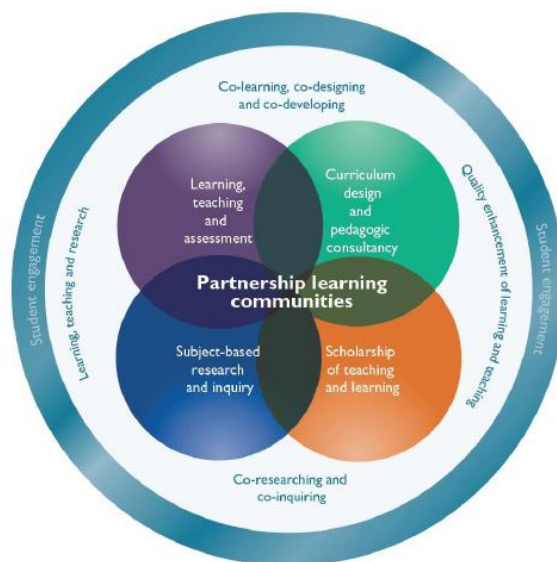


Fig 1. Collaboration between partners in teaching and learning in higher education

1. Learning, Teaching, and Assessment

The most common way to understand CTL and meaningful student learning is to engage them as partners. As previously mentioned, active learning is the key to this (Graham et al., 2007). Reflecting on the experience of learning helps the idea of active learning and student engagement, Kolb (1984, p.38) theorizes that “Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience”, and this process may be akin to experiencing, reflecting, generalizing, and testing. The importance of active learning was revealed in Trowler’s (2010) international review into student engagement. She found that such engagement is enhanced by: (a) student active involvement in their learning (both asynchronously and synchronously); (b) collaborative tasks (e.g., peer-to-peer learning, peer review, assessment); (c) student participation in the creation, delivery, and assessment of their learning (Healey et al., 2014).

Involving students as collaborative partners in assessment is increasingly adopted in many countries. Self-assessment and e-assessment are two examples of how institutions can increase student autonomy and self-regulated learning (Ellis & Folley, 2011). The flexibility and freedom gained by learners who can negotiate their choice of assessments is a fine example of positive collaborative teaching and learning. This also forms an important part of recognizing ‘assessment for learning (Cambridge Community, n.d.), which is an approach to teaching and learning that generates feedback. This is then used to improve students’ performance. This way learners become more involved in the process of learning and from this gain confidence in what they hope to achieve and are expected to learn.

2. Subject-Based Research and Inquiry

The second way of engaging students as partners collaboratively is in research and inquiry into their subject or area of interest, though in some way, the students are seen as research assistants. It is believed that the time has come to move on from the paradigm shift from teaching to learning, to one based on discovery and inquiry.

There are two main models for engaging students in partnership in this way (Healey & Jenkins, 2009). The first model aims to give selected students an authentic research experience. This could be beyond the curriculum, for example, students who are given a bursary to work for six weeks during the summer vacation with a member of academic staff or in a laboratory (Laursen et al., 2010). The second model integrates the research experiences into the curriculum (Healey & Jenkins, 2009). As with active learning, not all ways of engaging students in research and inquiry involve partnership, but there are many examples where students negotiate as partners and have extensive autonomy in many of the details of the research and inquiry projects that they undertake (Healey et al., 2014).

3. Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL)

The scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) comprises theorizing how students learn within a discipline and communicating and disseminating the findings (Healey, 2000). Most SoTL projects are undertaken by staff members and engaging students in undertaking SoTL projects is rather infrequent; students are usually seen as the subject of research undertaken by staff. Yet, Felten (2013) suggests that one of the five principles of good practice in SoTL is that the projects are conducted in partnership with students. The idea is not novel, but most of the initiatives focused on engaging students as partners are in teaching and learning (Healey et al., 2014).

4. Curriculum Design and Pedagogic Consultancy

Students are regularly involved in course evaluations and departmental staff-student committees, but it is uncommon for institutions to go beyond the students’ voice and collaborate in designing the curriculum and giving pedagogic

advice and consultancy. These ways of engaging students as partners complement those discussed in the last section in which students undertake SoTL projects and the student representative systems which are well developed in many institutions of higher education (Healey et al., 2014).

A post-graduate course in educational technology at the University of Regina in Canada involves students in creating and mapping their curriculum through combining their own blogs with knowledge sign-posted by tutors and engaging in discussions with professionals within the tutors' networks. In this way, the tutors enable an entry point for the students into a professional learning community. More importantly, the students' emerging knowledge not only impacts the development of the curriculum, but also the growth of the learning community and knowledge within the discipline (Healey et al., 2014; Cormier, 2008).

III. POTENTIAL CHALLENGES AND TENSIONS

The approach of working with a partnership approach can heighten the awareness of conflicting tensions and priorities between the differing perspectives and motivations of those involved, specifically the students, the tutors, and the coordinators of courses, at the individual as well as institutional levels. It elevates challenges to present assumptions and norms about working in Higher Education, but at the same time provides opportunities for thinking and reacting differently. This is done by embracing the challenges as problems to grapple with and learn from. Taylor and Robinson (2009) explore this challenge concerning student voice between the normative ideal of student engagement and the realities of practice. Such realities refer to the constraints and limitations of the current context. With a partnership approach, it is in the tensions raised, and in being prepared to acknowledge, tackle, and innovate, where the potential for new and further learning resides.

Where confronting new initiatives and methodologies are concerned, it could spark anxieties and increase stress levels among staff members and students. This could stem from the unfamiliarity of the grounds, failure to adopt and adapt in consideration to the culture, beliefs, and values of the institutions involved, forcing the model onto the tutors without fully understanding the rationale of the change. Often, staff and students, have different motivations and reasons for engaging in partnership, and this results in varied experiences of navigating established structures, practices, and norms (Bovill et al., 2016). These could lead to differing perceptions of one another's tasks and roles in the partnership process. This can possibly give rise to tensions around power differentials, reward and recognition of participation, identity, and accountability for each partnership. As the desire for change naturally varies among individuals, the resistance to change can be heightened when partners experienced conflicting views. The next paragraph will highlight some concerns both staff and students may have.

The concerns of staff may center on carving out time for collaborative work with students on top of their existing heavy workloads, as well as how students can meaningfully contribute to the development of teaching and learning materials when they may lack the subject or pedagogical knowledge, and whether it is wise for students to have a voice in elements like assessment. On the other hand, students may also be concerned about changing their role and whether stepping out of their comfort zone would truly benefit them, and they often require specific assurance on how the changes would affect their grades and performance (Bovill et al., 2016). However, when staff and students recognize that their current habits and performance can be improved and may not be ideal at the moment, the resistance to change can be reduced or eliminated. Both parties must be convinced that the changes to be implemented must work to their benefit, in ways calculated that meet their needs (Healey et al., 2014). For example, it is important to avoid asking students to contribute beyond their means and in order to mitigate that, they can undergo specific training before they are asked to brainstorm and suggest ideas. They should gain confidence gradually before shifting to a more collaborative partnership in due course. This requires the understanding of staff members and consistent communication, which includes active listening and regular feedback sessions during the learning process.

As CTL could regularly involve group activities, weaker students who may be struggling to speak up may potentially face an increased level of difficulty in participation. Free riders or bystanders may also potentially precipitate from such arrangements, which may result in a dichotomy in the learning levels for the class (Saito et al., 2020). Potential techniques like allocation of roles by staff (de Beer & Petersen, 2017; Law, 2014) and rewarding participation (Sears & Pai, 2012; Unrau et al., 2015) may help to mitigate the potential issues. However, as such techniques encourage learners to be task-focused and are goal-centric, staff should continually be on the lookout and encourage learners who potentially have questions to voice out and speak up along the way.

IV. SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF SAUDI ARABIA

As authentic CTL accords learners of English greater engagement in the classroom (Chen et al., 2021), it may imply a proportionally greater exposure in speaking and the practice of English during group exercises as compared to typical classroom teaching and correspondingly affect the academic achievement of learners. Gubbad (2010) found in research conducted in Saudi Arabia that as compared to a control group being taught via traditional methods, the group being taught via CTL showed a significant positive difference in the achievement evaluation test. Another survey conducted by (Awatef, 2006), demonstrated that learners who were taught via the CTL method showed a statistically significant distinction between post and pre-test results, and students who were taught via the CTL method achieved a higher level

of linguistic performance in English. As such, CTL may potentially be a solution to the lower-than-expected performance of English language learners in Saudi Arabia. Notwithstanding the above, more extensive research should also be conducted to understand the potential gain in performance against the overhaul required in the Saudi Arabian educational system as achieving authentic CTL requires more than just a change in teaching method.

A transition to CTL would potentially require more than just a change of way of teaching or an introduction of a new way of teaching into Saudi Arabian teaching. For CTL to be truly effective, staff would need to embrace a paradigm shift in their role as an educator: from that of a deliverer of curriculum and content to be a facilitator who listens and adapts the lesson according to the needs of the learners (Bjork, 2005; Sato, 2012). In this regard, it may require an overhaul of the entire Saudi Arabian educational system that would potentially require years to implement. Further research and survey among Saudi Arabian staff should also be conducted to understand the true extent of staff's view of their role as an educator in the 21st century. This would allow for more targeted training to effectively eradicate any potential misconceptions should CTL be implemented.

Another viable aspect to consider is to increase the collaborative learning strategies in the current e-learning environments. Due to COVID-19, all institutions worldwide have to shift to online teaching and learning regardless of the readiness of the learners, staff members, or the institutions. Alkhalaf et. al. (2013) report that an increased student interaction in the e-environment, which could be fostered using CTL is likely to be both popular with students in Saudi Arabia and beneficial to their learning outcomes. More recent research in the country reveals positive outcomes using collaborative teaching and learning strategies in writing classes in Saudi English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes (Alkhalaf, 2020). A collaborative writing strategy was used and a number of advantages in terms of the quality of the produced texts and improvements in students' writing skills were highlighted. This strategy can be adopted in both online and offline environments. The model this paper suggested can also be considered when applying this teaching strategy. For instance, an intentional partnership between staff and students can be planned and implemented in the developing of materials and deciding on the assessment criteria and mode. With this partnership, there would be an increased motivation to learn and be involved in the class.

In the EFL situation in Saudi Arabia, the learning of vocabulary is mostly relegated to heavy memorization. Therefore, formal assessments and achievement tests have proven to be unfruitful to learners' progress and proficiency in the language. One recent study found that using an e-tool of collaborative learning indicated improved vocabulary retention and critical knowledge application (Al-Ahdal et al., 2021). This was a pilot study done on intermediate EFL learners at Majmaah University and Qassim University, using a mobile-assisted language learning tool.

Hakim (2015), a research done in EFL classrooms in Saudi Arabia, noted an increase in learner satisfaction whilst participating in collaborative learning which also increased their motivation to work harder and make more effort to use the target language in their interactions with each other. In this regard, it would appear that in a Saudi Arabian context, the effects of CTL in an EFL classroom may be a potential game-changer if implemented correctly. Notwithstanding the current CTL research done in Saudi Arabia, further research can be conducted to understand whether an overall framework (e.g., the repeated use of a CTL method at every level) for CTL which spans across the various levels in the EFL classrooms would be helpful to allow for a more effective and efficient application of CTL.

V. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Understanding the culture, history, and educational beliefs of an institution before recommending a change is as important as implementing a change effectively. The above suggestions and recommendations based on previous research have been tested in various countries and institutions. However, not all strategies would produce similar results as there are many variables, including the age group, level of proficiency and competence, and learning styles. This paper aims to shed light on a particular model of CTL, specifically in partnering students, which is relevant to many aspects of enhancement and innovation in curriculum and pedagogy, particularly in Higher Education, and the possible application of such methods in Saudi Arabia.

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