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The Debatable Effect of Collaborative Learning on the Performance of Saudi EFL Learners in Grammar-Focused Tasks

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ABSTRACT
Collaborative learning (CL) has attracted sustained interest as a pedagogical approach in English as a foreign language (EFL) instruction, yet its effectiveness remains contested. This study examined the effect of CL on the performance of 696 Saudi EFL learners completing multiple-choice (MC) and open-ended (OE) grammar-focused tasks, representing selected-response and constructed-response formats, respectively. Participants were assigned to four groups to determine whether pair work improved task performance and whether CL was differentially effective across task types. Using a quasi-experimental design with four comparison groups (CLOE, CLMC, ILOE, and ILMC), the study found that CL did not yield a significant performance advantage over individual learning (IL); in fact, learners working individually outperformed those working collaboratively at the post-test stage. Task type also had a significant effect, with learners consistently performing better on MC than on OE tasks. These findings suggest that the benefits commonly attributed to CL are not universal and may depend heavily on task format and implementation.
Keywords: collaborative learning; grammar-focused tasks; multiple-choice questions; open-ended questions; EFL

1. INTRODUCTION

The 1970s saw growing interest in implementing communicative language teaching (CLT) in both foreign- and second-language settings (cf. Breen & Candlin, 1980; Canale & Swain, 1980; Savignon, 1991). The adoption of CLT brought substantial changes to classroom methodology, including a shift away from teacher-led activities toward more learner-centered approaches such as collaborative learning (CL) (Dörnyei, 1997; McInnerney & Roberts, 2004; Panitz, 1999; Taylor & Wigglesworth, 2009).

CL is grounded in the premise that social interaction builds knowledge (Paz Dennen, 2000). It involves EFL learners working cooperatively in groups of two or more on activities structured so that group members depend on one another to achieve a shared goal (Johnson & Johnson, 2009; Nasri & Biria, 2017; Olsen & Kagan, 1992; Paz Dennen, 2000). Woolfolk (2001, as cited in Abass, 2022, p. 17) describes CL as involving mixed-ability groups whose members are rewarded according to the group's collective achievement. A shared goal, individual accountability for each member's contribution, and the mutual exchange of feedback are widely regarded as defining features of CL (DiNitto, 2000; Long & Porter, 1985; McInnerney & Roberts, 2004; Richards, 2006; Richards & Rodgers, 2014; Savignon, 1991; Storch, 2002, 2007; Watanabe & Swain, 2007). Advocates argue that the meaningful communication CL fosters gives learners more opportunities to practice varied forms of speech interaction, thereby increasing talking time and strengthening interpersonal skills (Raja, 2012; Rakab, 2016).

The range of proposed benefits has motivated a substantial body of research on the presumed value of CL for EFL learning (Baleghizadeh, 2010; Hanafiah, 2011; Long & Porter, 1985; Storch, 2007; Wigglesworth & Storch, 2009; Yaghoubi-Notash & Sarbakhshian, 2014). One prominent line of research (e.g., Storch, 2005; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2007) has compared the performance of learners working collaboratively with that of learners working individually on grammar-focused tasks. Some researchers attribute gains in grammatical fluency to increased student talking time and a focus on meaningful communication (Namaziandost, Shatalebi, & Nasri, 2019; Renou, 2001; Rakab, 2016), and some report higher accuracy among CL groups relative to individual learning (IL) groups (Baleghizadeh, 2009). Others (e.g., Goss, Ying-Hua, & Lantolf, 1994; Storch, 2005, 2007; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2007), however, report only minimal differences between the two modes. Given this discrepancy, the present study examines the impact of CL on the performance of Saudi EFL learners across two types of grammar-focused tasks—multiple-choice (MC) and open-ended (OE)—and addresses the following research questions:

1. Do students working collaboratively outperform those working individually on multiple-choice grammar-focused tasks?
2. Do students working collaboratively outperform those working individually on open-ended grammar-focused tasks?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The adoption of CLT has substantially reshaped second-language (L2) classroom instruction. One notable change has been the shift from instructor-centered activities toward more learner-centered strategies such as CL, which

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is believed to increase learners' opportunities to use the target language for authentic purposes (Breen & Candlin, 1980; Canale & Swain, 1980; DiNitto, 2000; Jabeen, 2014; Long & Porter, 1985; McInnerney & Roberts, 2004; Richards, 2006; Richards & Rodgers, 2014; Savignon, 1991; Storch, 2007; Yaghoubi-Notash & Sarbakhshian, 2014). CL engages learners in small groups of two or more "in order to promote both their individual learning outcomes as well as the learning outcomes of their peers" (Herrmann, 2013, p. 175). Traditional teacher-fronted instruction has been criticized for limiting learners' active participation in exchanging ideas; by contrast, CL "accords with the communicative approach to L2 methodologies and its emphasis on providing learners with opportunities to use the L2" (Storch, 2007, p. 143).

Within CL, teachers act as facilitators, models, and coaches, supporting learners in ways intended to build social awareness, communication skills, and language competence (Namaziandost, Shatalebi, & Nasri, 2019). CL requires active learner interaction, which is considered essential to the cognitive development of communicative ability. The underlying assumption is that CL fosters learner autonomy by engaging students' receptive and productive skills in meaning negotiation, feedback exchange, and the co-construction of language knowledge within a relaxed, interactive setting (Dobao, 2014; Long & Porter, 1985; Odehova, Nevska, & Perlova, 2022; Sun & Yuan, 2018; Taylor & Wigglesworth, 2009).

Proponents of CL argue that it facilitates L2 learning through peer mediation and meaning negotiation (e.g., Kuiken & Vedder, 2002; Shin, Lidster, Sabraw, & Yager, 2016; Storch, 2002; Swain & Lapkin, 1998; Swain, Brooks, & Tocalli-Beller, 2002). CL is said to increase opportunities for language practice, improve the quality of student talk, individualize instruction, foster a positive classroom climate, and increase motivation (Long & Porter, 1985). By substantially increasing each learner's speaking time, promoting autonomous interaction, and distributing responsibility among group members, CL offers organizational advantages that are relatively quick and easy to implement (Harmer, 2001; Sun & Yuan, 2018).

Empirical support for these claims has accumulated across several studies. Zarifi and Taghavi (2016) examined the effect of CL on grammar learning among 50 Iranian EFL learners and found that CL was more effective than traditional instruction in developing grammatical knowledge. Odehova, Nevska, and Perlova (2022) compared pair work and group work and found that both improved the accuracy of learners' grammatical output. Storch (2005) and Storch and Wigglesworth (2007) reported that CL led to higher accuracy on grammar-focused tasks relative to individual work, while Goss, Ying-Hua, and Lantolf (1994) found that Spanish learners working in pairs performed modestly better than those working individually on grammatical tasks. Comparable findings (e.g., Dang, 2007; Gillies, 2011; Kao, 2003; Liao, 2010; Tuan, 2010; Vo, 2010) indicate that CL can improve language achievement as well as interpersonal and creative-thinking skills relative to individual work.

In the Saudi context, Alghamdi and Gillies (2013) conducted a 12-week study across four secondary schools comparing CL with traditional instruction for developing EFL grammatical competence. Students taught through CL significantly outperformed those taught through traditional, teacher-led instruction. Alghamdi (2014) subsequently examined Saudi EFL learners' perceptions of CL and found that most students felt it improved their language skills, built new peer relationships, allowed them to take on varied roles, and strengthened their oral presentation ability and motivation. Reported drawbacks included lower-achieving learners' reliance on stronger peers, unequal opportunities to contribute within groups, uneven group composition, and insufficient instructor supervision. Alharbi (2008) investigated the effect of CL on reading comprehension, attitudes, and reading motivation among 60 Saudi EFL female students using a quasi-experimental design with 30 students in each of a control and an experimental group. While reading motivation did not differ significantly between groups, the experimental group showed significantly better reading comprehension and more positive attitudes toward cooperative learning.

Not all findings favor CL, however. Thanh-Pham, Gillies, and Renshaw (2009), reviewing a series of studies on CL in non-Western contexts, found that more than half reported CL to be no more effective—and in some cases less effective—than traditional lecture-based instruction for academic achievement. Storch (2007) compared L2 learners working in pairs with those working individually on grammar-focused tasks and found that although pairs took longer to complete the tasks, there was no significant difference in mean accuracy between the two groups. Nassaji and Tian (2010) examined collaborative completion of two output tasks—reconstruction cloze and reconstruction editing—for learning English phrasal verbs; although working in pairs produced greater task-completion accuracy, it "did not lead to significantly greater gains of vocabulary knowledge than individual tasks" (p. 397).

This inconsistency across studies underscores the need to examine CL's effectiveness across varied contexts, since it "may facilitate learners' interaction and attention to the target forms, but it may not necessarily lead to superior learning in comparison to individual work" (Nassaji & Tian, 2010, p. 400). As Storch (2007) observed, "despite the strong pedagogical and theoretical arguments for the use of small group and pair work, there has been relatively little empirical research comparing small group and individual [work]" (p. 145). Within Saudi Arabia specifically, Alkhannani (2021) notes that "there has not been in-depth research in relation to the use of CTL [collaborative teaching and learning] for English language acquisition in Saudi Arabia" (p. 1288).

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One dimension that has received relatively little attention is the role of task type in shaping CL's effectiveness. Odehova, Nevska, and Perlova (2022) argue that while CL's contribution to fluency is well documented—owing to increased speaking time and a focus on meaningful interaction—evidence that pair and group work foster accuracy remains limited. The present study addresses this gap by examining how EFL learners perform, both individually and collaboratively, on grammar-focused tasks that include both multiple-choice and open-ended items (Shin, Lidster, Sabraw, & Yager, 2016).

3. RESEARCH METHODS

The study employed a quasi-experimental design with four comparison groups. A total of 696 students enrolled in an intensive English course at Riyadh College of Technology participated over one semester. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four groups on the basis of two variables: (i) task completion mode—collaborative (CL) or individual (IL)—and (ii) task type—multiple-choice (MC) or open-ended (OE).

The first group (n = 174, distributed across nine CL classes) completed an OE task collaboratively at pre-test and a parallel OE task individually at post-test. The second group (n = 174, nine CL classes) completed an MC task collaboratively at pre-test and a parallel MC task individually at post-test. The third group (n = 174, nine IL classes) completed OE tasks individually at both pre-test and post-test. The fourth group (n = 174, nine IL classes) completed MC tasks individually at both pre-test and post-test. Procedures are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of procedures used

Task Type	Mode	Label	Pre-test Procedure	Post-test Procedure
MC	CL	CLMC	Pairs answered MC questions collaboratively, then received and discussed the model answer together.	Participants individually completed a parallel MC task.
MC	IL	ILMC	Each student answered MC questions individually, then compared answers against the model answer.	Participants individually completed a parallel MC task.
OE	CL	CLOE	Pairs answered OE questions collaboratively, then received and discussed the model answer together.	Participants individually completed a parallel OE task.
OE	IL	ILOE	Each student answered OE questions individually, then compared answers against the model answer.	Participants individually completed a parallel OE task.

Table 2. Distribution of participants by group

Group	N	Percentage
CLOE*	174	25%
CLMC**	174	25%
ILOE***	174	25%
ILMC****	174	25%
Total	696	100.0%

* Collaborative, open-ended. ** Collaborative, multiple-choice. *** Individual, open-ended. **** Individual, multiple-choice.

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Table 3. Distribution by task completion mode (CL vs. IL)

Mode	N	Percentage
CL	348	50%
IL	348	50%
Total	696	100.0%

Table 4. Distribution by task type (MC vs. OE)

Task Type	N	Percentage
OE	348	50%
MC	348	50%
Total	696	100.0%

As Tables 3 and 4 show, the sample was evenly split between task completion modes and task types, with 348 participants (50%) in each category.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Pre-test Results

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) indicated statistically significant differences between the four groups at pre-test, $F(3, 714) = 20.94$, $p < .01$ (Table 5).

Table 5. One-way ANOVA for the difference between groups at pre-test

Source	SS	df	MS	F	Sig.
Between Groups	72223.42	3	14104.57	20.94	.000**
Within Groups	820882.57	714	1149.70		

** $p < .01$

A Scheffé post hoc test identified the source of these differences (Table 6).

Table 6. Scheffé test for the difference between groups at pre-test

Group	Mean	Significant vs.	Difference in favor of
CLOE	46.31	CLMC, ILMC	—
CLMC	62.14	CLOE, ILOE	CLMC
ILOE	43.32	CLMC, ILMC	—
ILMC	66.55	CLOE, ILOE	ILMC

Differences significant at $p < .05$.

As Table 6 shows, students completing MC tasks outperformed those completing OE tasks at pre-test, regardless of mode: the CLMC group outperformed both CLOE and ILOE, and the ILMC group outperformed both CLOE and ILOE. No significant differences emerged between the two CL groups (CLMC vs. CLOE) or between the two IL groups (ILMC vs. ILOE) taken together, nor between the collaborative and individual groups within the same task type. This pattern indicates that task type, rather than collaborative work, drove performance differences at this stage—a conclusion reinforced by Table 7, which shows no significant overall difference between the pooled CL and IL groups.

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Table 7. T-test for the difference between means at pre-test

Comparison	Group	N	Mean	SD	t	Sig.
CL vs. IL	CL	348	54.23	35.42	0.12	.902 (n.s.)
	IL	348	53.90	35.22		
MC vs. OE	MC	348	64.39	27.84	7.91	.000**
	OE	348	44.65	38.61		
CLMC vs. ILMC	CLMC	174	62.14	29.20	1.47	.143 (n.s.)
	ILMC	174	66.55	26.35		
CLOE vs. ILOE	CLOE	174	46.31	39.22	0.75	.456 (n.s.)
	ILOE	174	43.32	38.16		
ILMC vs. ILOE	ILMC	174	66.55	26.35	7.01	.000**
	ILOE	174	43.32	38.16		
CLMC vs. CLOE	CLMC	174	62.14	29.20	4.20	.000**
	CLOE	174	46.31	39.22		
ILMC vs. CLOE	ILMC	174	66.55	26.35	5.58	.000**
	CLOE	174	46.31	39.22		
CLMC vs. ILOE	CLMC	174	62.14	29.20	5.42	.000**
	ILOE	174	43.32	38.16		

** $p < .01$

Table 7 confirms that there was no significant difference between the CL and IL groups in overall pre-test performance, whereas task type had a strong effect: students scored significantly higher on MC tasks ($M = 64.39$) than on OE tasks ($M = 44.65$), $p < .01$. The advantage held across mode—CLMC significantly outperformed both CLOE and ILOE, and ILMC significantly outperformed both CLOE and ILOE—while no significant difference emerged between CLMC and ILMC or between CLOE and ILOE. In other words, the statistically significant differences at pre-test were consistently associated with task type rather than with collaborative work; students working collaboratively did not appear to benefit from mutual interaction and discussion at this stage.

4.2 Post-test Results

At post-test, all participants completed their respective tasks individually, allowing the effect of prior CL experience to be assessed. A one-way ANOVA again showed statistically significant differences between groups, $F(3, 714) = 4.97$, $p < .01$ (Table 8).

Table 8. One-way ANOVA for the difference between groups at post-test

Source	SS	df	MS	F	Sig.
Between Groups	14694.82	3	4898.27	4.97	.002**
Within Groups	704337.64	714	986.47		

** $p < .01$

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Table 9. Scheffé test for the difference between groups at post-test

Group	Mean	Significant vs.	Difference in favor of
CLOE	47.11	ILOE, ILMC	—
CLMC	54.96	—	—
ILOE	57.87	CLOE	ILOE
ILMC	58.81	CLOE	ILMC

Differences significant at $p < .05$.

Table 9 shows that the CLOE group scored significantly lower than both the ILOE and ILMC groups at post-test. As at pre-test, task type continued to matter, but at post-test, individual work also emerged as advantageous relative to collaborative work—an important reversal from the pre-test pattern, in which mode made no significant difference. A closer look at the group means in Table 10 clarifies this pattern.

Table 10. T-test for the difference between means at post-test

Comparison	Group	N	Mean	SD	t	Sig.
CL vs. IL	CL	348	51.03	31.15	3.09	.002**
	IL	348	58.30	31.77		
MC vs. OE	MC	348	56.92	28.13	1.65	.100 (n.s.)
	OE	348	53.06	34.51		
CLMC vs. ILMC	CLMC	174	54.96	27.54	1.27	.205 (n.s.)
	ILMC	174	58.81	28.64		
CLOE vs. ILOE	CLOE	174	47.11	34.02	3.04	.003**
	ILOE	174	57.87	34.23		
ILMC vs. ILOE	ILMC	174	58.81	28.64	0.29	.769 (n.s.)
	ILOE	174	57.87	34.23		
CLMC vs. CLOE	CLMC	174	54.96	27.54	2.32	.021*
	CLOE	174	47.11	34.02		
ILMC vs. CLOE	ILMC	174	58.81	28.64	3.44	.001**
	CLOE	174	47.11	34.02		
CLMC vs. ILOE	CLMC	174	54.96	27.54	0.91	.361 (n.s.)
	ILOE	174	57.87	34.23		

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

Table 10 shows that, overall, participants who worked individually (M = 58.30) outperformed those who had worked collaboratively (M = 51.03) at post-test, regardless of task type, $p < .01$. This pattern is reinforced by the finding that participants who completed the OE task individually (M = 57.87) scored significantly higher than those who had completed it collaboratively (M = 47.11). The effect of task type observed at pre-test persisted at post-test: the CLMC group (M = 54.96) continued to outperform the ILOE group (M = 43.32 at pre-test), and the ILMC group (M = 58.81) significantly outperformed the CLOE group (M = 47.11).

Comparing performance across the two testing points, summarized in Table 11, provides a fuller picture of the study's findings.

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Table 11. T-test for the difference between pre-test and post-test means

Group	Pre-test M (SD)	Post-test M (SD)	t	Sig.
All Groups	54.05 (35.29)	54.90 (31.67)	0.76	.447 (n.s.)
CL	54.23 (35.42)	51.03 (31.15)	1.76	.079 (n.s.)
IL	53.90 (35.22)	58.30 (31.77)	3.32	.001**
CLOE	46.31 (39.22)	47.11 (34.02)	0.27	.790 (n.s.)
CLMC	62.14 (29.20)	54.96 (27.54)	3.62	.000**
ILOE	43.32 (38.16)	57.87 (34.23)	7.75	.000**
ILMC	66.55 (26.35)	58.81 (28.64)	5.63	.000**
OE	44.65 (38.61)	53.06 (34.51)	4.85	.000**
MC	64.39 (27.84)	56.92 (28.13)	6.23	.000**

Overall, no statistically significant change occurred between pre-test and post-test when all groups were pooled, and the same held true for the CL group specifically. There was likewise no significant pre-to-post change for the CLOE group. These results indicate that CL did not improve grammatical accuracy as measured in this study.
Working individually, by contrast, was associated with significant improvement: the IL group's performance rose significantly from pre-test to post-test ($M = 53.90$ to $M = 58.30$, $p < .01$), suggesting that individual engagement with corrective feedback and closer attention to one's own errors—unlike the shared attention characteristic of CL—supported gains in grammatical accuracy.
Task type also interacted meaningfully with these patterns. Both MC groups combined declined significantly from pre-test to post-test ($M = 64.39$ to $M = 56.92$, $p < .01$), while both OE groups combined improved significantly ($M = 44.65$ to $M = 53.06$, $p < .01$). At the level of individual groups, however, this OE improvement was significant only for the ILOE group ($M = 43.32$ to $M = 57.87$, $p < .01$); the CLOE group showed no significant change. This raises the question of whether CL is more or less suited to particular types of grammar-focused tasks.

5. DISCUSSION

This study examined the effect of CL on the performance of EFL learners on two types of grammar-focused tasks (MC and OE). CL did not improve performance on either task type, a finding that complicates the widely cited assumption that CL benefits language learning. This result aligns with the documented variability in CL's effectiveness across the literature and echoes Kim's (2020) observation that "simply assigning learners to work in pairs or groups does not guarantee that they will work collaboratively. The relationship a pair forms is important for understanding learner interaction" (pp. 134–135). The findings are also consistent with Storch's (2007) conclusion that pair work and individual work do not differ significantly in average accuracy on grammar-focused tasks.
Variation in the quality of interaction and the nature of dialogue among learners may help explain the inconsistent effectiveness of CL. Watanabe and Swain (2007) found that only learners who engaged in genuinely collaborative patterns of interaction achieved higher scores. While CL can expose students to multiple viewpoints, support co-construction of understanding, and develop critical thinking, it may not be equally useful across all instructional contexts. Sociocultural theorists have consistently cautioned that mere interaction in pairs or groups does not automatically create learning opportunities; Storch (2007) similarly notes that CL does not necessarily entail collaboration, and that learning opportunities arise only when learners engage collaboratively rather than merely working alongside one another. She argues that even where CL with grammar-focused tasks does not improve accuracy, it may still afford learners valuable opportunities to use the second language for a range of communicative functions.
Other researchers point to the risk that learners sharing a first language may reinforce one another's incorrect interlanguage forms (e.g., Ammar, Lightbown, & Spada, 2010; Simard & Wong, 2004). Leesen (2004) similarly found that pairs of learners with similar proficiency benefited more from collaboration than pairs with divergent proficiency levels. Affective factors may also help explain why CL did not improve grammatical performance in this study, since learner attitudes are known to shape motivation to engage with, and benefit from, collaborative learning opportunities (e.g., Cook & Singleton, 2014; Mercer, 2011; Storch, 2013).
Task type emerged as a particularly consequential variable. Students showed a greater ability to use CL productively on MC tasks than on OE tasks. MC items may generate a distinct kind of interaction: discussion

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tends to center on eliminating or selecting among the given options, which allows students to arrive at a correct answer through test-taking strategy rather than through target grammatical knowledge. OE tasks, in contrast, impose demands more closely tied to higher-level language production skills (Badger & Thomas, 1991; Cooney et al., 2004), which may be less amenable to the kind of strategic negotiation that CL affords.
The variation observed across studies of CL in EFL instruction likely reflects a combination of factors, including group dynamics, the quality of student collaboration and communication, the instructional design underlying collaborative tasks, learners' prior language experience, cultural background, and individual learning preferences.

6. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study challenge the assumption, common in the CL literature, that collaborative work reliably outperforms individual work in language learning. They suggest instead that the value of CL needs to be evaluated carefully within specific instructional contexts. In particular, CL in the EFL classroom should be thoughtfully designed and administered: instructors should consider the type of task with which CL is used, the duration over which it is implemented, and the procedures governing its administration.
This study has several limitations. Participants received no explicit training in how to collaborate effectively, yet such training is widely regarded as a prerequisite for successful CL implementation. The study also did not assess learners' attitudes toward, or impressions of, CL; affective variables merit further attention, since cultural orientations toward individualism and collectivism are known to shape how students perceive and engage with collaborative learning. Future research should incorporate structured CL training, examine learner attitudes directly, and extend the comparison of task types to other language skills beyond grammar.

Declarations

Consent for publication
Not applicable.
Availability of data and materials
The dataset(s) supporting the conclusions of this article is(are) available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.
Competing interests
The authors declare that they have no competing interests.
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