

Investigation of Cooperative Learning Techniques and Attitudes in Language Learning Classrooms

Safaa Mohammad Alhebaishi*

Taibah University, College of Education, Department of Curricula and Teaching Methods, Almadinah, Saudi Arabia

Corresponding Author: Safaa Mohammad Alhebaishi, E-mail: dr.safaa93@yahoo.com

ARTICLE INFO

Article history

Received: December 10, 2018

Accepted: February 20, 2019

Published: March 31, 2019

Volume: 8 Issue: 2

Advance access: February 2019

Conflicts of interest: None

Funding: None

ABSTRACT

The study investigates the Cooperative Learning (CL) techniques implemented by intermediate school language teachers and examines students' attitudes regarding the use of CL in language classes. To realize the objectives of the study, two instruments were used to collect data: observation reports and an attitude questionnaire. Observation were conducted in 31 classrooms in 12 intermediate public schools, and the attitude questionnaire was administered to 547 students. The observation results revealed that CL was not accurately implemented in a majority of the classrooms. Language teachers made several mistakes in the implementation of CL techniques. Furthermore, the results of the attitude questionnaire showed that the students' attitudes towards CL were positive.

Key words: Cooperative Learning Techniques, Students' Attitudes, Language Classrooms

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Definition

Cooperative learning (CL) is an instructional method in which students learn by helping each other in an educational setting. It is a set of instructional activities that require learners to work in small heterogeneous groups (Slavin, 1987). CL is "a form of active learning designed to enhance individual learning via student group interaction" (Riley & Anderson, 2006, p.130). Johnson and Johnson (2008) defined CL as "the instructional use of small groups so that students work together to maximize their own and each other's learning" (p.26). It is a teaching strategy that promotes socialization and learning among students in classes ranging from kindergarten through college across different subject areas (Cohen, 1994). According to Jacobs, Power and Loh (2016), CL involves "principles and techniques for helping students work together more effectively" (p. ix). Doymus (2008) stated that CL is an instructional technique in which students work together in small structured groups to accomplish shared goals. Johnson and Johnson (2009) described CL as a student-centred pedagogy in which the teacher's role changes from being the deliverer of information to the facilitator of students' learning, as students acquire knowledge and create their own meanings. Norman (2005) added that "CL is important for creating inclusive classroom environments that meet the needs of all students because it takes heterogeneity into account, encouraging peer support and connection" (p. 3).

A review of the literature reveals that the terms "cooperative learning", "collaborative learning" and "group work" are sometimes used interchangeably which is reasonable

because the purpose of all three terms is to minimize competitive individual learning by engaging students in supportive group learning experiences. The three methods utilize student diversity to establish mutual engagement, equal participation and social interaction among them. However, researchers have clarified that the three methods are different. Woolfolk (2004) explained that group work is different from CL in that group work involves simply placing students together and giving them a task to perform, however, group work may not lead to actual cooperation. In contrast, Macpherson (2015) illustrated that the scope of CL extends beyond simply grouping students and assigning them tasks. Rather, CL requires students to cooperate among themselves and depend on each other to perform classroom tasks (Peterson & Skiba, 2002).

Comparing cooperative and collaborative learning, Richards and Rodgers (2001:192) opined that "cooperative learning is a part of a more general approach known as collaborative learning". Therefore, collaborative learning is used as an umbrella term for a number of instructional methods that involve mutual effort from active groups to achieve a common goal or complete a task (Nelson, 2007). Yang, Chan, Ho, and Tam (2005) indicated that the main focus of cooperation is working together, whereas collaboration focuses on the process of working together. Similarly, Oxford (1997:443) pointed out that "cooperative learning is more structured, more perspective to teachers about classroom techniques, more directive to students about how to work together in groups than collaborative learning". Furthermore, Rockwood (1995) distinguished between the two methods from the perspective of the teacher's role as follows: in a CL classroom, the teacher is the authority centre

and more closed-ended group tasks are used; in contrast, in a collaborative learning classroom, the authority is transferred to groups, who are often assigned more open-ended tasks.

Theoretical Background

The theoretical foundation of the CL concept is largely rooted in and influenced by several theories and approaches, such as the humanistic approach, constructivism, socio-cultural theory and second language acquisition theories (Jacobs, 2004; Stepanovienė, 2013). CL emphasizes the importance of student autonomy and a supportive learning environment in the learning process, which are basic principles of the humanistic approach. When students work together, they support each other, listen to each other, manage diversity, and cooperate among themselves to solve problems. This approach reduces fear and stress and, correspondingly, increases motivation. The socio-cultural theory perceives learning as a social process rather than an individual process that takes place through interactions among people. Dewey (1938) stated that individuals tend to discover knowledge and construct meaning through personal experience and peer interactions in a supportive environment. Similarly, Piaget (1964) argued that social experience, knowledge, language, rules, values and morality are acquired through interaction with others. Furthermore, Vygotsky (1978, cited in Almula, 2017) stated that learners can exchange ideas and knowledge to achieve shared goals in a CL environment. He added that social interaction helps foster a positive learning environment that results in greater achievement for all group members. Furthermore, the advantages of CL can be applied to Karshen's second language acquisition theory, which implies the importance of improving language acquisition by providing learners with opportunities to communicate and negotiate meaning in a social context (Richard, 2005). In a CL environment, learners have numerous opportunities to negotiate meaning by listening to each other, asking questions, exchanging ideas, discussing issues, clarifying concepts, and defending their opinions. This environment enables a high degree of comprehensible input and maximizes the amount of student talk, which facilitates language learning. The principles of communicative language teaching are also applicable to CL. Both communicative language teaching and CL concentrate on the importance of social interaction and communication among students, emphasize self-autonomy, consider more communicative language functions and enable students to establish close relationships with their peers.

Cooperative Learning Principles

To enjoy the maximum benefits from CL implementation, Jacob, Power, & Loh (2002) and Gillies (2007) stated that groups should be established according to the following important principles. (1) Cooperation should be framed as a value by encouraging students to consider mutual assistance as an aim and to prefer cooperation over competitive individual work. (2) Heterogeneous grouping, which involves working with diverse individuals rather than individuals that students prefer to work with, should be used. (3)

To encourage positive interdependence, all group members should work together and need each other to accomplish the assigned task, and each member's contribution should help the group achieve its goals. (4) Promotive interaction, which occurs when there is close physical proximity between group members so that they can see each other, listen to others, and participate in face-to-face discussions, should be encouraged. Promotive interaction in turn helps students communicate easily and develop personal rapport. (5) Simultaneous interaction, which happens when the entire class works simultaneously, should also be promoted. In simultaneous interaction, all students are engaged in contributing to group work, unlike in traditional classrooms, where students spend much of their time listening to a teacher or a selected student. (6) Individual accountability, which is based on the idea of equal participation, should be supported. Every member should have a role to play, contribute to the group's success and exhibit mastery of the assigned learning material. (7) Students should develop interpersonal skills, which include learning the skills required for effective cooperation, such as communicating successfully, establishing good relationships, sharing resources, expressing ideas, managing disagreements, resolving conflicts, and making decisions. (8) Group processing, which reflects both the contribution of each member to group work and the group's progress towards accomplishing its goals, should occur. Group members should send and receive feedback to take relevant action or make decisions to improve the quality of group work.

Cooperative Learning Techniques

Although there is sufficient evidence in the research literature regarding the benefits of CL, no one has specifically recommended that students should always work in groups. To ensure successful CL implementation, Brown (2001), Richards and Renandya (2001), and Gillies (2007) recommended that the implementation of the following techniques is essential.

Introducing CL to students

Professional teachers should provide their students with clear and sufficient explanations of CL before implementing it. They should provide information on different aspects, such as team building, effective cooperation with group members, assignment of roles and responsibilities, and assessment procedures.

Giving instructions

Teachers should provide students with instructions and directions that precisely describe what the students are expected to do, what skills they should develop, what signals and expressions to use while responding to their teacher, and what behavioural conduct they should internalize during group work. Furthermore, it is important to establish classroom rules and norms that guide students to contribute, help, interact, share, and overcome difficulties.

Establishing a supportive climate

The successful implementation of CL requires teachers to build a supportive, relaxed atmosphere in which students can help each other learn flexibly, safely and comfortably. Further, research shows that the classroom seating arrangement and physical environment affect the type and amount of communication, social interaction, and student behaviour desired in CL (Cornell, 2002). If teachers require students to work together, they should avoid seating arrangements suited for lecture-based classrooms such as rows and columns fixed to the floor that hinder communication and cooperation among students. In the CL classroom, students should sit close to each other along a round or square desk. The closer together the students sit, the more calmly they work and talk. However, there should be sufficient space among them to help them maintain eye contact and share materials without hindering the activities of others.

Forming groups

Groups are formed in various ways. (1) Heterogeneous groups are formed according to students' academic ability, proficiency level, gender, and race. This group type is the most preferable since heterogeneity allows the inclusion of diverse abilities, styles, skills and experiences; hence, it increases students' opportunities to benefit from one another. (2) Homogenous groups are formed based on similar characteristics, such as gender, performance, or proficiency level. (3) Random groups are formed without considering any particular factor. It is an easy grouping technique and conveys the idea that one can work with anyone. (4) Interest groups are formed according to individual interests such as friendship or cliques.

Selecting the group size

The best option is to keep groups small. Smaller groups can perform activities more quickly than larger groups. The use of smaller groups increases the amount of student engagement and participation and requires fewer management techniques. Although large groups are advisable for big tasks or complex projects, they are more difficult to manage and might easily cause a student to be left out or neglected. Experts on CL recommend that teachers start by grouping students into pairs and then into groups of four. Cohen and Lotan (2014) stated that groups of four are favourable for constructive discussion and powerful collaboration. This group size enables members to maintain physical proximity and listen to conversation attentively and establish eye contact with group members.

Assigning roles

Assigning roles is a method to minimize conflict and reduce misbehaviour in a group. By assigning roles, a teacher allots each member a function to perform so that a student knows what is expected of him/her. Some examples of roles can be carried out by students are data recorder, timekeeper,

monitor, observer, facilitator, reflector, investigator, checker, and elaborator. Another important aspect of assigning roles is ensuring that the roles are compatible with the activity type and that the roles are rotated frequently so that students can perform new roles.

Introducing tasks

The teacher's duty is to design or select tasks that are appropriate for CL. Tasks should be structured so that students cooperate with each other to achieve common goals. For example, students can work in groups to solve a problem, discuss an issue, share ideas, develop a product, prepare a presentation, and design a project. After selecting a task, the teacher must introduce the task and provide sufficient information to students, such as the defined objectives, criteria for success, and required skills. Furthermore, the teacher is expected to explain the major concepts and strategies necessary to complete the task.

Setting a time limit

Time limits are useful since they help students develop their time management skills, particularly when one student in each group is acting as a time checker. The teacher may extend the time limit if it is exceeded; however, most groups tend to work within the time limit.

Monitoring the task

The teacher should constantly walk around CL groups to monitor the groups' activities. During this step, the teacher can respond to students' questions, clarify doubts, facilitate communication, correct mistakes, manage overly dominant and passive students, reduce noise levels, motivate students, and provide feedback.

Advantages of Cooperative Learning

Earlier research has confirmed that the incorporation of CL in teaching is advantageous to students. Jacobs, Power and Loh (2016: p. xi) stated that CL can benefit students in the following areas: "improved achievement, increased motivation, improved collaboration skills, improved student attitudes towards learning, and greater opportunities for teachers to assess student learning". Alhabeedi (2015) found that CL promoted students' participation, motivation, sense of responsibility and desire for challenges. Erdem (2009, p. 2) summarized the advantages of CL as follows: "CL supports learning and academic success of the students, increases keeping useful information in mind longer, helps feel satisfied while learning, improves communication skills, develops social skills, enhances self-respect, improves meta cognitive thinking skills, and helps students express their ideas during discussions and be critical". Kagan (1994, cited in Koutselini, 2009) explained that CL provides students with a wide range of experiences, such as active learning opportunities, and enhances communication skills, higher-order thinking skills, and social skills, which are vital for

success in today's world. According to Johnson and Johnson (2009), CL has positive outcomes not only for students' academic achievement but also for their psychological health and social interaction. Students are more likely to form friendly relationships, trust one another, and influence one another in CL classrooms than in competitive classrooms (Deutch, 1992). Friendly relationships and trust lead to a reduction in stress in class and increases in students' motivation (Slavin, 1995). CL also promotes inter-group relationships with individuals from different cultural and ethical backgrounds (Slavin & Cooper, 1999). CL is used as a teaching strategy to understand how to manage conflicts and develop appropriate interpersonal skills (Cowie & Berdondini, 2001). Furthermore, CL is considered a tool that prepares students to acquire and develop generic skills that prepare them for their work lives. These skills include "team work skills; analytic and cognitive skills; collaborative skills such as conflict and resolution management; and organizational and time management skills" (Natoli, Jackling & Seelanatha, 2014: p.118).

Challenges of Cooperative Learning

Teachers and students may encounter some challenges to successful CL implementation such as the following examples. (1) Some group members may lack commitment to CL implementation efforts due to their reluctance to work. Furthermore, some may prefer not to share their ideas or participate in group discussion, whereas others may dominate group work and ignore their colleagues (Friedman, Cox, & Maher, 2008). (2) Unequal efforts resulting from different working abilities and proficiency levels of group members potentially resulting in time wastage. Low achievers require more time to comprehend task requirements, whereas high achievers find it inconvenient to explain each detail to low achievers and, hence, undertake the majority of the work to avoid time wastage (Alfaris, 2017). Similarly, low-proficiency students find it difficult to negotiate meaning and correct each other's mistakes, which may cause them to lose confidence and develop language anxiety. (3) Low-proficiency student sometimes code-switch to comprehend their tasks and enhance interpersonal interactions (Alhedan, 2014). High proficiency students code-switch as well if the teacher does not insist on using L2 for communication and explanation. (4) Poor CL techniques which may be attributed to several reasons such as misconceptions regarding CL, a lack of previous knowledge and training on CL, a lack of proper planning, inappropriate implementation, and negative attitudes towards CL (Saborit et al., 2016). (5) Unfair assessment which occurs when passive participants are granted equal scores as completely active participants (Natoli, Jackling, and Seelanatha, 2014). (6) Noise problems, which are caused when group members work on CL activities and speak at the same time to accomplish their tasks, thereby bothering other colleagues. (7) Behavioural management can become problematic if teachers lose control over student misbehaviours, particularly those related to discipline, such as resolving conflicts and managing trouble makers. (8) Group members sometimes commit errors while performing their tasks, such as lexical,

grammar, discourse and pronunciation errors, but in group work, students may sometimes neglect to provide feedback on errors to their peers, and at other times, they may not be aware that their peers have committed errors. Certainly, a teacher can correct students' errors in teacher-fronted classes; however, she/he cannot stand behind students' backs to correct every mistake they make (Salas, 2005).

Cooperative Learning in Language Classrooms

CL is particularly beneficial when it is used in English classrooms. It gives language learners more opportunities to listen to the foreign language (FL) and use more complex language while interacting with group members (Bruner, 1974). Long and Porter (1985) highlighted some benefits of group activities over individual activities in learning a FL such as more opportunities to use the target language, more practice of various language functions, a wider range of opportunities for error correction and utterances completion, and more processes for the negotiation of meaning. Harmer (2007) stated that CL is one of the best strategies that can be used by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students to learn a language thoroughly. He stated the following advantages of this strategy: increased speaking opportunities for each learner, development of personal relationships, enhanced exchange of opinions, improved negotiation skills, and promotion of learner autonomy. Wahyukti (2017) stated that CL enhances English language acquisition by decreasing students' learning anxiety, encouraging their active participation, increasing the amount of student talk, and providing a non-threatening classroom environment. McGroarty (1989) argued that CL activities foster both comprehension and production of the FL by students. When students work in groups, they cooperate to correct their mistakes and clarify misunderstandings in communication by rephrasing or correcting their group members' statements. Kagan (1995) and Lin (2006) clarified that CL creates an interactive learning environment in which students can improve their L2 acquisition by using various methods to negotiate meaning. When students cooperate in a language classroom, they obtain more opportunities to listen to each other, ask for repetition or clarification, exchange ideas, defend opinions, complete tasks, think about problems and propose solutions. Within-group interaction and cooperation facilitate the negotiation of comprehensible input and help learners to modify their output and make it more meaningful to others. In addition, Richards (2005) affirmed that group work helps learners to negotiate more since the presence of a comfortable environment assists them in negotiating with others without pressure. Zhang (2010) stated that the incorporation of CL into FL classrooms had positive outcomes, such as enhancing the necessary academic and social skills of students.

Previous research on teaching EFL has documented several positive effects of and students' attitudes towards CL compared with individual learning. Some researchers, such as Storch (2005), Shehadeh (2011), and Kwon (2014), studied students' attitudes, benefits and concerns regarding writing in pairs or groups. In general, the attitudes of the study participants were mainly positive. In Storch's (2005) study,

the majority of the participants believed that collaborative writing provided them with opportunities to learn from each other, share ideas and improve accuracy. The common concerns were the low proficiency levels of some participants and reluctance to provide feedback. Shehadeh's (2011) findings revealed that collaborative writing was effective in improving students' L2 writing. It had a significant effect on content, organization and vocabulary but not on mechanics or grammar. Kwon (2014) found that some students faced difficulties in group writing, including differences in proficiency levels, difficulties in following decision-making processes, and peer relationship problems. Murad (2015) investigated Kurdish students' attitudes towards the use of group work in EFL classrooms. The results indicated that students had both positive and negative opinions regarding group work. Some students preferred group work since positive collaboration among group members helped them learn from each other and finish their tasks in a short period. On the other hand, some students preferred not to share their ideas with others, and others disliked group work and considered it a time for relaxation.

Ruiz's (2014) study revealed that group work is a good technique to reduce anxiety and that it provides students with a secure and comfortable environment that enhances FL oral proficiency. Jahanshahi (2013) found that working in groups and inter-group cooperation significantly affected students' willingness to communicate using the target language. The findings of Shih, Chern and Liang's (2002) study revealed that CL enhanced learners' oral communicative competence and their motivation to learn English. Gömleksiz (2007) found that CL promoted students' positive attitudes towards learning English. It improved students' vocabulary knowledge and promoted interactions among students as well. Nausheen, Alvi, Munir and Anwar (2013) showed that university students had positive attitudes towards CL. They perceived its advantages, such as satisfaction, enjoyment, better understanding and support from peers. Burke (2011) stated that CL enhanced students' motivation to obtain better grades, their feelings of being engaged, and their satisfaction with education. Gonzales and Torres (2016) and Er and Aksu Ataç, (2014) revealed that the majority of students preferred CL to individual learning because CL helped them to better understand study contents and participate in classroom activities.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

For many years, language instructors have been using various active learning strategies to promote participation and interaction among learners. One of the most common among these strategies is CL. The numerous advantages of CL in FL classrooms cannot be ignored. It has proved its significance in increasing students' motivation, communication and collaboration. However, unless it is carefully implemented, students and teachers might find CL frustrating.

As part of my work in mentoring and coaching preservice teacher trainees in practicum courses, I have attended many CL classes for both experienced and novice language teachers with trainees. Through observation, I found that CL techniques are not successfully implemented in many FL

classrooms. The incorporation of appropriate CL techniques represents a real challenge for language teachers. Furthermore, Xuan (2015) stated that many English teachers do not adopt this method in their classes since they find it difficult to implement it in English teaching. Most of them make serious mistakes when implementing CL techniques in their lessons. For example, I observed the following errors: (1) the overuse of the CL strategy, some teachers assume that CL should be utilized in every lesson and that it suits all activities; (2) the use of the CL strategy as a supplementary activity during the evaluation process at the end of the lesson; (3) errors in the physical classroom setup that may hinder effective CL application; (4) the use of inappropriate grouping techniques or group sizes, with the use of groups either too small or too large to accomplish the task, the use of unequal group sizes in the same class, and the formation of groups according to students' interests (fringing groups); (5) challenges posed by group work control and management, such as assigning roles, handling overly dominant or overly passive students, managing conflicts, and responding to students' misbehaviours and time management; (6) teachers' failure to supply students with sufficient directions and instructions, and their ignorance of the development of students' academic and social skills; (7) the issue of unequal engagement and interactions among group members; (8) a lack of monitoring of student learning while working in groups; (9) a lack of teacher knowledge or teacher training, which may affect successful implementation; and (10) the use of the native language as a tool for explanation and communication among group members, which minimizes their opportunities to practice the target FL.

In reviewing the CL literature, the researcher found that the majority of studies have been conducted to highlight the advantages of CL for students (Othman & Murad, 2015) and show that CL is more effective than traditional learning strategies (Erdem, 2009; Shih, Chern, & Liang, 2002; Mahmoud, 2014). Furthermore, some attention has been paid to evaluating the techniques of effective CL implementation and how they may affect students' attitudes towards CL. Similarly, studies conducted in the Saudi setting have investigated the effectiveness of CL in improving language skills and developing positive attitudes, motivation, and self-autonomy among students (Almashjari, 2013; Bawazeer, 2013; Mahmoud, 2014); have revealed the benefits and difficulties of implementing CL in EFL classrooms (Alfares, 2017; Raja, Qureshi & Albeshir, 2017); or have highlighted the urgent need to provide CL implementation training to the majority of Saudi teachers (Almula, 2017). Therefore, the current study could significantly contribute to the CL literature since, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, no similar study has been conducted in Saudi Arabia to investigate the CL techniques implemented by language teachers in EFL classrooms.

QUESTIONS

1. What are the techniques implemented by language teachers while implementing CL activities in FL classrooms?

2. What are the attitudes of FL intermediate students towards implementing CL in FL classrooms?

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study investigates the techniques used by EFL teachers when incorporating CL into Saudi English classrooms. It also clarifies how Saudi intermediate FL students perceive CL. Such information may be important for the following purposes:

- The findings of the study may contribute insights and information to the current CL literature.
- The findings may function as guidelines for language teachers who utilize CL to improve FL students' communication and interaction.
- The study aims to draw teachers' attention to some of the implementation difficulties encountered in applying CL techniques.
- The findings may also help language teachers understand how FL students perceive CL so that they can consider such attitudes to better meet the needs of their students.
- The study could provide suggestions for improving CL training programmes for in-service teachers and recognize the factors that affect CL implementation.
- The study may encourage stake holders in teacher education programmes to make future decisions to train student teachers on the appropriate practical and pedagogical implementation of CL.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The study sample included 611 Saudi female EFL students studying in 31 classrooms at 12 intermediate public schools in Almadinah City, KSA. Their ages ranged between 12-15 years. Their ages ranged between 12 and 15 years.

Instruments

Two instruments were used to collect data: classroom observation reports and an attitudes questionnaire. The observation reports covered areas related to CL techniques such as classroom organization, group formation, group size, time lines, group instructions, classroom management, student engagement, and CL activities. The questionnaire comprised 16 items measuring students' attitudes towards CL. Eight items were favourable, and eight were unfavourable. The items were rated on a 3-point Likert scale, with the options of agree, undecided, and disagree. The students' responses were respectively scored 3, 2, and 1 for the favourable items and 1, 2, and 3 for the unfavourable items. To determine the validity of the two instruments, an expert panel evaluated the relevance of the contents of both the instruments to the field of the study. To compute the reliability of the observation, the inter-rater reliability method was used to check the level of agreement between the two raters (the researcher and preservice teachers), who agreed on the principles and

procedures of observation techniques. The questionnaire's reliability was examined by applying Cronbach's alpha method. The Cronbach's alpha value was .783, indicating that the questionnaire was reliable.

RESULTS

Results of the Observation Reports

Analysis of the observation data collected on 12 items in 31 EFL classrooms revealed the following techniques used by EFL teachers in CL activities.

Accuracy of the implementation techniques

The results revealed that 19.35% of the language teachers implemented CL techniques accurately, whereas the majority, 80.64%, committed either major or minor mistakes during CL implementation, such as, choosing inappropriate activities due to any one of the following reasons: selection of activities more suitable to individual work, selection of activities unsuitable for the group size, selection of boring or non-challenging activities, problems related to classroom and time management, failure to engage all group members in group activities and failure to monitor students during group work or provide them with clear and sufficient instructions. Inaccurate CL implementation might be attributed to the teacher's misconceptions of CL principles and techniques; their insufficient training in practical implementation; or their negative beliefs, attitudes or experiences.

Classroom seating arrangement (rows, clusters, circle, semi-circle)

The observation results revealed that the physical setup of tables and chairs in all the observed classrooms (31 classrooms) were clusters. The cluster seating arrangement was fixed in all classes and for all activities. Students were seated in groups around tables from the beginning of the school day until the end. This situation reflects a shift from the traditional classroom setup which typically consists of rows and columns of fixed seats, to a more flexible design that encourages interaction and collaboration among learners. It also reveals a widespread tendency among intermediate-school teachers to implement active learning strategies, such as CL.

The cluster seating arrangement in all observed classrooms is considered a double-edged sword. Although it reflects the increasing tendency in intermediate schools to encourage the use of active learning strategies to shift from teacher-centred to student-centred classrooms, it also demonstrates the over use of CL in such classrooms. It is known that changing from one seating arrangement to another is beneficial to students and can significantly affect performance. Most students like to change the physical classroom setup. The use of a single seating arrangement for all subjects, lessons, and activities is not a recommended approach. The typical classroom design should be harmonious with the students' needs, the teaching strategies and the class size. Furthermore, the use of the cluster arrangement has some

issues over the long term: it prevents some students from facing the teacher when the teacher is explaining or talking; it increases distraction, noise levels and side talking; it requires teachers to expend more effort on establishing rules to manage students' behaviour.

Group formation and size

The results showed that all groups in the 31 observed classrooms were friendship groups. Regarding the group size, it was noted that in 11 (35%) classes, there were 4 students in each group; in 14 (5.16%) classes, there were 6; in 3 (9.67%) classes, there were 7 to 8; in 3 (9.67%) classes, the size of the groups was not equal. Big groups were present in crowded classrooms. An amazing finding was that the group size was fixed regardless of the task nature, requirements or complexity.

Regarding the group formation technique, all classes used the friendship formation technique, which is based on giving students the chance to select the group mates whom they like. A possible explanation for the use of this technique is that it is intended to make students feel comfortable and to avoid fighting among group members. Certainly, there is evidence that students benefit most from working with friends, as they tend to accept more learning responsibilities and are more motivated to achieve their learning goals than when working with students who are not friends (Abrami, Chambers, Poulsen, DeSimone, & Howden, 1995). However, friendship grouping may not be the best group formation technique in the CL classroom. Some researchers have advocated the use of heterogeneous groups. Slavin (1993) indicated that heterogeneous grouping based on abilities benefits student learning. Heterogamous grouping reflects the real authentic world outside the classroom where different people interact and communicate with each other. Students have the opportunity to listen to diverse perspectives and exchange ideas. In addition, they learn how to work and socialize with people unknown to them, which could improve their social skills.

Regarding group size, notably, the majority of the groups had 4 to 6 members, which is considered an ideal group size, to some extent. Two implementation mistakes pertaining to the group size technique were noticed during observation: (1) the group size was fixed irrespective of the amount of work required for the specific task at hand; and (2) in some classes, the group size was not equal within the same class due to the simultaneous presence of groups with 5, 6 and 7 members. The ideal group size should correspond to the work load.

Provision of time limits and clear instructions

It was found that approximately 51.61% of teachers established time limits before assigning group activities, whereas 48.38% neglected to employ this technique. The results revealed that the majority of teachers, 87.09%, provided students with clear instructions before assigning group activities; however, 12.90% of the teachers did not. The teachers who did not provide clear instructions distributed worksheets

and activities, expecting students to read the question or the activity and appropriately respond to it. Providing students with clear instructions or rules before carrying out CL activities is a fundamental step that helps ensure that the activity is meaningful for students. In addition, students also recognize the expected behaviours and rules to be followed while performing the task, which assists the teacher in managing student behaviour during CL sessions.

Assignment of roles

The findings revealed that a large percentage of teachers, 89.12%, did not assign roles to group members while implementing CL, which was disappointing. By assigning roles, a teacher gives each student a responsibility to do something, which enhances the individual's accountability. It encourages mutual participation and discourages group work dominance. Roles should vary according to the nature of the tasks being assigned. Some examples of suggested roles are facilitator, recorder, reflector, noise monitor, and time keeper. Furthermore, roles should be rotated frequently to provide every student an opportunity to practice various roles and realize each role's expectation. The rotation of roles enables students to acquire social, communication and leadership skills.

Types of CL activities

The results indicated that 48.38% of teachers chose to use workbook activities as part of CL, such as reading or listening comprehension questions, grammar exercises, vocabulary matching questions, and writing and spelling activities. In contrast, 51.61% of teachers designed CL activities that were not included in students' textbooks, such as language games, role playing, and brainstorming.

Appropriateness of activities to CL

The results indicated that 61.29% of CL activities were suitable for CL implementation whereas 38.70% were not suitable for group work since they could be performed as individual work. This finding shows that a high percentage of teachers designed activities that were appropriate to CL and group size, whereas other teachers selected drills and exercises that were available in students' textbooks, some of which were inappropriate for either CL or group size. CL activities should stimulate learning, thinking, and communication with group members rather than merely emphasizing the completion of tasks or drills included in textbooks for individual practice. Moreover, the amount of work required for the assigned activity should match group size to ensure the active participation of all members.

Matching CL activities to group size

It was observed that CL activities were suitable for the group size in 64.51% of the classes, whereas there was no match between CL activities and group size in 35.48% of the classes. Easy activities were often assigned to large groups.

Native language use

Students' native language (Arabic) was used in 84.52 % of the classrooms for discussion and communication among group members. During group discussions and interactions, a large percentage of language classrooms allowed students to switch to the native language to facilitate comprehension; however, they provided their answers in English. It seemed easier for students to clarify their view points, share their ideas, solve problems, and explain concepts in their native language. Teachers did not draw the attention of students to the use of English for communication. Rather, they were more concerned with supplying the final product in English alone.

Noise level

The majority of the classes, 54.83%, were noisy during the implementation of CL activities, but in 45.16% classes, the groups worked and cooperated quietly. Teachers can reduce the noise level of classes by performing the following: (1) establish rules and instructions to help manage classroom behaviour; (2) assign one student per group to be the noise monitor, whose function is to encourage the group to cooperate actively, yet quietly; (3) allow students to sit close together to not only help reduce noise levels but also foster cooperation; and (4) use signals to gain students' attention, for instance, using cards or a ringing bell to inform students to work more quietly.

Student engagement and work load

The results showed that group members were engaged during CL in 54.83%, of the classrooms; however, in 45.16% of

the classrooms, not all the group members were engaged since some members were ignored or neglected. Furthermore, the results indicated that the CL workload was carried out mainly by the high-achieving students in 45.16% of the observed classrooms. To overcome this situation, teachers should establish good group dynamics to maximize productive work, clarify expectations and learning outcomes, avoid selecting tasks that are unsuited for group work, and monitor students during CL activities.

Monitoring CL groups

Unfortunately, the majority of language teachers, 63.82%, did not monitor or circulate throughout the classroom while groups were performing their tasks, which may have reduced the effectiveness of CL implementation. Teachers should move between groups to perform the following: clarify misconceptions, answer questions, make students aware of time limits, reinforce appropriate behaviour, manage dominant students, offer help, solve problems, and provide feedback.

Results of the Attitude Questionnaire

This section helps to answer the second research question and presents the descriptive statistics, including the frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation values. The results of the attitude questionnaire analysis depicted in Table (1) reveal that the participants agreed on the items included in the questionnaire, with a total mean of 2.4100 out of 3.00. This finding indicates that students had favourable attitudes towards CL. They perceived beneficial effects of CL in the English classroom, such as sharing ideas and views, receiv-

Table 1. Results of the attitude questionnaire

No.	Statement	Agree no. %	Undecided no. %	Disagree no. %	M	SD	R	*Sig
1	CL helps me carry out assignments more quickly	514 84.28%	2 0.34%	94 15.38%	2.6890	0.72306	2	Agree
2	CL helps me comprehend knowledge better	448 73.32%	5 0.83%	158 25.85%	2.4746	0.87624	6	Agree
3	CL helps me exchange ideas and viewpoints with group members	524 85.76%	2 0.24%	85 13.91%	*2.7185	0.69374	1	Agree
4	CL helps me develop language skills	383 62.68%	11 1.81%	217 35.51%	2.2717	0.95377	12	Undecided
5	I like to work in a group of highly competent students	511 83.63%	9 1.48%	91 14.89%	2.6874	0.71666	3	Agree
6	CL helps me promote better social skills	476 77.90%	10 1.65%	125 20.45%	2.5745	0.80913	5	Agree
7	CL enables me to get help from group members	505 82.65%	9 1.48%	97 15.87%	2.6678	0.73502	4	Agree
8	I get the grade I deserve when I work in a group	64.15%	2.79%	33.06%	2.3110	0.93644	11	Undecided
9	Not all students are equally cooperative in performing group activities	335 54.82%	11 1.81%	265 43.37%	1.8854	0.98512	16	Undecided
10	I often do not have a real role in my CL group	230 37.64%	16 2.63%	365 59.73%	2.2209	0.96255	15	Undecided

(Contd...)

Table 1. (Continued)

No.	Statement	Agree no. %	Undecided no. %	Disagree no. %	M	SD	R	*Sig
11	I consider working in the group a break from the English class routine activities	219 35.84%	14 2.3%	378 61.86%	2.2602	0.95439	14	Undecided
12	Working in a group makes me less understanding of others	175 28.64%	15 2.46%	421 68.90%	2.3895	0.90833	9	Disagree
13	I prefer to switch to my native language when communicating with my group members	219 35.84%	12 1.97%	380 62.19%	2.2635	0.95521	13	Undecided
14	My group members do not respect my feelings or opinions	203 33.22%	13 2.14%	395 64.64%	2.3142	0.93884	10	Undecided
15	I do not like to work with people who are different from me	168 27.49%	12 1.97%	431 70.54%	2.4304	0.89240	7	Disagree
16	I think I can learn English better if I work individually	272 44.51%	21 3.45%	318 52.04%	2.4026	0.89713	8	Disagree
					Total *M	Total *SD		
					2.41008	0.39384		

ing help from group members, carrying out activities more quickly, promoting social skills, and comprehending knowledge better. CL provided opportunities for students to obtain assistance from peers. Students may pay more attention to clarifications provided by their peers than to those provided by a teacher. CL also created a supportive atmosphere that helped students to enhance their communication and social skills, since they could interact with different individuals to exchange various experiences and viewpoints. Students were motivated to use CL because group members cooperated to perform assignments more quickly. In general, students felt that they could learn English better through CL than through working individually.

The results revealed some problematic and controversial issues related to CL, as well, such as issues pertaining to assessment, student engagement, the assignment of roles, group dominance, and native language use. Students had contradicting viewpoints regarding these issues. They seemed generally unsatisfied with the assessment techniques used by teachers. The observation analysis showed that the same score was allotted to all group members regardless of their actual participation. Students also expressed their concerns regarding student engagement since not all group members were equally engaged in group activities. This issue is closely related to two important issues: the assignment of roles and group dominance. Unequal effort among group members can be attributed to either teachers' negligence to assign a definite role to each group member or their lack of monitoring which allowed some students to dominate group work and others to consider it a break from their usual classroom routine. Furthermore, the findings revealed students' contradictory views regarding native language use and whether CL could help them improve their language skills. Sometimes, students switched to their native language to clarify points or communicate with group members since, as noted in the observations, a large percentage of language classrooms allowed students to use their native language during group discussion. The use of the native language makes it more

comfortable for some students to explain their ideas to their group members than the use of English, and hence, students were unable to decide whether CL could help them improve various language skills.

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study is twofold: (1) to investigate the CL techniques implemented by language teachers in EFL classrooms and (2) to examine intermediate school students' attitudes towards CL. Accordingly, two research instruments were used to collect data from 31 language classrooms: (1) analyzing observation reports and (2) an attitude questionnaire. The results collected from observation analysis revealed that CL was overused in language classrooms. Although teachers routinely used CL as an instructional strategy, they made mistakes in implementing techniques, such as determining group formations and sizes, providing instructions, assigning roles, selecting appropriate CL activities, managing CL groups, monitoring and evaluating groups.

Further, analysis of the observation reports indicated that teachers were unable to differentiate between CL and group work. The majority of them organized a physical classroom setup appropriate for CL, distributed tasks and asked students to work together under the assumption that these steps indicated CL. Usually, in this situation, the high achievers of the groups assumed the responsibility of providing answers. Further, most of the selected activities were drills and exercises that did not stimulate thinking or cooperation and consequently were inappropriate for CL. Another major mistake was that students were allowed to use their native language during group discussions and communication, which did not help them improve their language competency. One of the main reasons for implementing CL in language classrooms is to encourage students to produce linguistic output and interact among themselves to correct or modify their output. The language teachers' overuse of CL along with implemen-

tation difficulties indicated that although they acknowledged the benefits of CL, they had either insufficient training or background knowledge regarding its implementation. Furthermore, language teachers had misconceptions regarding group work and CL.

However, the results collected from the attitude questionnaire revealed that students had positive attitudes towards CL. They considered CL to be beneficial since it helped them acquire knowledge, support each other, perform assignments quickly and promote social skills. This finding agreed with the findings of Nausheen, Alvi, Munir and Anwar (2013), Mahmoud (2014), Murad (2015), Gonzales and Torres (2016), and Almulan (2017). Furthermore, the students expressed some concerns regarding CL. For example, they sometimes received scores that they did not deserve, had no specific roles in their groups, expended unequal efforts compared to that of their group members and were in conflict with their group members. Based on its findings, the current study recommends that FL teachers should attend workshops providing practical training for CL implementation and deepen their understanding of the major differences between group work and CL. Further studies are required to clarify the relationship between language teachers' perceptions of CL and their classroom practices and the correlation between CL implementation and variables such as teacher age, gender, experience, and training.

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