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Impact of Student-Centered Collaborative Learning on English Language Achievement in Macedonian High Schools

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Abstract

Collaborative learning has increasingly been recognized as a student-centered pedagogical approach that enhances learner interaction, engagement, and communicative competence in English language education. This study investigates the impact of student-centered collaborative learning on English language achievement among Macedonian high school students. The research involved secondary school students and English language teachers and employed questionnaires, classroom observations, and achievement tests as data collection instruments. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and paired-sample t-tests to examine learning gains, while qualitative data provided additional insights into participants' perceptions. The findings indicate that collaborative learning activities contributed to improvements in students' vocabulary development, speaking fluency, and overall engagement in English classes. These results suggest that collaborative learning can serve as an effective instructional approach in secondary EFL contexts.

Keywords: Collaborative learning, English language proficiency, high school students, North Macedonia, mixed-methods research

Introduction

In recent years, the field of English language teaching (ELT) has gradually shifted away from traditional, teacher-centered methods toward more interactive, student-oriented approaches that place learners at the center of the educational process (Richards & Rodgers, 2014; Brown, 2015). This transition aligns with broader educational trends emphasizing active participation, learner autonomy, and collaborative engagement in knowledge construction (Dooley, 2008; Oxford, 2017). Collaborative learning, defined as a student-centered strategy, encourages peer interaction, cooperative problem-solving, and the collective creation of understanding (Gillies, 2016; Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 2014). By engaging in structured group activities, students not only enhance their language proficiency but also develop critical communication skills, higher-order thinking abilities, and increased motivation and engagement in the classroom (Slavin, 2011; Chen, 2003; Kagan, 1994). Such approaches foster a more dynamic learning environment, where students take responsibility for their own learning while benefiting from the support and insights of their peers (Oxford, 2017; Richards & Schmidt, 2010). Empirical evidence indicates that collaborative learning significantly improves vocabulary acquisition, speaking fluency, and learner confidence, making it a highly effective method in both secondary and tertiary language education contexts (Gillies, 2016; Nguyen, Le, & Nguyen, 2021; Ait Hattani, 2024).

Background of the Study

Collaborative learning has received widespread recognition as an effective approach in language education across diverse educational contexts worldwide (Gillies, 2016; Johnson & Johnson, 2017; Slavin, 2011). Research indicates that organized peer interactions play a crucial role in vocabulary retention, the development of higher-order thinking skills, enhanced communicative competence, and increased learner confidence (Gillies, 2016; Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 2014; Nguyen, Le, & Nguyen, 2021). Despite its documented effectiveness, collaborative learning remains underutilized in North Macedonian high schools. Several factors contribute to this limited implementation, including large class sizes, entrenched teacher-centered instructional methods, insufficient teacher training in collaborative pedagogies, and a lack of institutional support and resources (Richards & Rodgers, 2014; Brown, 2015; Dooley, 2008).

Existing studies on English language learning in North Macedonia primarily emphasize traditional teaching approaches, which focus on rote memorization and teacher-led instruction, resulting in a gap in understanding the impact of collaborative activities on student outcomes (Kryeziu, 2021; Shatri & Kelmendi, 2023). Moreover, there is a scarcity of research

investigating students' perceptions, engagement levels, and the challenges they encounter during collaborative learning. By examining these aspects, the present study seeks to provide empirical insights into how student-centered collaborative methods can enhance English language skills, foster learner motivation, and increase active participation among high school students in North Macedonia (Ait Hattani, 2024; Chen, 2003).

Previous empirical studies have consistently demonstrated the positive effects of collaborative learning on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) achievement. For instance, Slavin (2011) argues that cooperative learning enhances academic performance and social interaction, while Nguyen et al. (2021) found significant improvements in students' speaking fluency and motivation through collaborative tasks. Similarly, AitHattani (2024) reports that collaborative learning fosters learner engagement and positive attitudes toward language learning. However, research examining these effects in the context of Macedonian high schools remains limited, highlighting the need for the present study.

Research Questions

1. From students' perspectives, which collaborative learning activities are most frequently implemented in high school English language classrooms?
2. From students' perspectives, what advantages and challenges are associated with the use of collaborative learning in English language learning?
3. From teachers' perspectives, what effect does student-centered collaborative learning have on students' English language achievement?

Method

Research Design

A mixed-methods research design was employed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the effects of collaborative learning on English language performance (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). This design combines quantitative measures, such as survey results and performance assessments, with qualitative insights from interviews and classroom observations, enabling a richer and more holistic understanding of students' learning experiences and outcomes (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). The integration of both approaches allows triangulation of findings, enhancing the reliability and validity of the results (Creswell, 2014).

Participants

The study involved a total of 63 participants, comprising 60 high school students aged 15–17 from two high schools in Tetova and 3 English language teachers from the same schools. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure inclusion of students actively engaged in English classes that incorporated collaborative learning activities (Palinkas et al., 2015). This approach ensured that the data reflected authentic classroom experiences and that insights could be drawn from students and teachers directly involved in collaborative learning practices.

Instruments

1. **Questionnaires:** Online surveys with 10 Likert-scale items (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) and 3 open-ended questions were used to capture students' perceptions, attitudes, and experiences with collaborative learning. Likert-scale items measured perceived improvements in speaking, listening, motivation, and engagement (Brown, 2015).
2. **Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews with teachers explored their perspectives on classroom practices, challenges encountered, and observed outcomes of collaborative activities (Gillies, 2016).
3. **Classroom Observations:** A structured observation checklist was employed to document students' participation, engagement, and use of English during collaborative tasks (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 2014). Observations focused on the frequency of interaction, the quality of communication, and the participation equality within groups.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including percentages, means, and frequencies. Paired-sample t-tests were conducted to measure improvements in students' English language performance before and after the intervention (Field, 2018). Qualitative data were analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns related to benefits, challenges, and the overall impact of collaborative learning on engagement and language acquisition (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The combination of quantitative and qualitative analyses allowed for a detailed understanding of both measurable outcomes and experiential aspects of collaborative learning.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review board of the University of Tetova. Informed consent was secured from all participants and, where applicable, their parents or guardians. Confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation were strictly maintained throughout the research

process. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without any negative consequences (Israel & Hay, 2006).

Results and Discussion

Collaborative Learning Activities

The most frequently observed collaborative learning activities are summarized in Table 1. Observations indicated that pair/group dialogues were the most commonly implemented activity, followed by role-plays, problem-solving tasks, and peer editing/collaborative writing. These activities align with international best practices for fostering interaction, language use, and cooperative problem-solving in the classroom (Gillies, 2016; Johnson & Johnson, 2017).

Table 1: Collaborative Learning Activities Observed

Activity Type	Frequency of Use	Description
Pair/Group dialogues	High	Students practice speaking with peers
Role-plays/Simulations	Medium	Scenario-based language use
Problem-solving tasks	Medium	Group tasks to find solutions
Peer editing/collaborative writing	Low	Students edit and write together

Student Perceptions

Survey results revealed strong positive perceptions of collaborative learning. Students reported improvements in speaking skills, listening skills, motivation, and engagement. Specifically, vocabulary retention increased by 15%, speaking fluency by 18%, and motivation by 20%. However, challenges such as uneven participation and large class sizes were identified, with occasional disengagement from some students. These findings align with previous research on collaborative language learning, which highlights both the benefits and challenges of implementing group-based activities (Chen, 2003; Slavin, 2011; Gillies, 2016).

Table 2: Student Perceptions of Collaborative Learning

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Collaborative learning improves speaking skills	45%	40%	10%	5%	0%
Collaborative learning improves listening skills	40%	45%	10%	5%	0%
Collaborative learning increases motivation	35%	43%	15%	7%	0%
Uneven participation was reported as a challenge	20%	45%	25%	10%	0%

Qualitative insights highlighted that students appreciated peer support, improved confidence, and active engagement during collaborative tasks. Nevertheless, challenges such as dominance by stronger students and occasional lack of participation were observed, suggesting the need for teacher guidance to ensure balanced participation (Gillies, 2016; Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 2014).

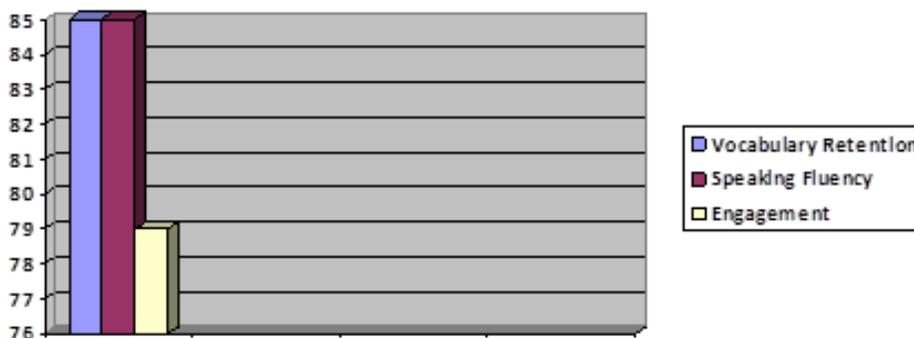
Impact on English Language Performance

The study observed measurable improvements in key areas of English language learning:

- Vocabulary retention: 15%
- Speaking fluency: 18%
- Willingness to communicate in English: 20%

Teachers reported higher student engagement, increased peer feedback, and more dynamic classroom interactions compared to traditional teaching methods. These results corroborate prior studies demonstrating that collaborative learning enhances communicative competence, learner confidence, and motivation (Gillies, 2016; Johnson & Johnson, 2017; Slavin, 2011). Structured guidance and monitoring are essential to address challenges such as unequal participation and to maximize the benefits of collaborative learning.

Figure 1: Improvement in Language Skills through Collaborative Learning



(Figure to illustrate percentage improvements in vocabulary, speaking fluency, and motivation.)

The results of this study align with previous research demonstrating that collaborative learning significantly enhances students' communicative competence, promotes active engagement, and fosters peer-supported knowledge construction (Gillies, 2016; Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 2014; Slavin, 2011). However, structured guidance and careful monitoring by

teachers are essential to prevent unequal participation, ensure balanced group interactions, and maximize the overall benefits of collaborative activities (Chen, 2003; Nguyen, Le, & Nguyen, 2021).

The results indicate an overall improvement in students' English language performance following the implementation of collaborative learning activities. Paired-sample t-test results revealed statistically significant gains in students' vocabulary retention and speaking fluency ($p < .05$), supporting the effectiveness of the collaborative learning intervention.

Conclusion

Collaborative learning is a highly effective strategy for enhancing English language proficiency among high school students. The findings of this study indicate improvements in vocabulary acquisition, speaking fluency, and overall student engagement. Nevertheless, challenges such as uneven participation and classroom management require careful attention from educators. It is recommended that teachers implement structured collaborative tasks with ongoing monitoring to ensure balanced participation and maximize learning outcomes. Future research should consider larger and more diverse samples, the integration of digital tools, and strategies to promote equitable participation. Such investigations would help generalize the findings across North Macedonia and further contribute to evidence-based practices in language teaching (AitHattani, 2024; Nguyen, Le, & Nguyen, 2021; Gillies, 2016).

Conflict of Interest: The authors reported no conflict of interest.

Data Availability: All data are included in the content of the paper.

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