

Enhancing Communication in English for Business and Management through Collaborative Learning: A Mixed-Method Study with Syrian Learners

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ABSTRACT

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This study investigates the effectiveness of collaborative learning in improving communication skills among English for Specific Purposes learners, who voluntarily enrolled in English for Business and Management Language Training course. This mixed-methods study investigated the effectiveness of a collaborative learning approach in enhancing communication skills among Syrian learners in English for Business and Management course. Quantitative data from a 12-item questionnaire administered to 22 participants revealed consistently high mean scores, indicating strong agreement regarding the positive impact of collaborative learning on communicative strategies such as active listening, negotiation, and handling disagreements. Qualitative data from semi-structured interviews, analysed thematically, further supported these findings, highlighting key themes of enhanced communication skills, increased engagement and motivation, and a supportive learning environment. Participants reported increased confidence and fluency in business-related communication, attributing this improvement to the interactive nature of collaborative activities and the supportive peer interactions. The study concludes that collaborative learning is an effective pedagogical approach for developing communicative competence among Syrian learners in English for Business and Management contexts.

Keywords: Collaborative Learning, Syrian Learners

Introduction:

In today's globalized world, English has become the primary language of communication across various domains, including business, academia, and international relations (Dugošija, 2021). As a result, proficiency in the English language and the ability to communicate effectively became crucial aspects for individuals seeking to excel in their careers. Specific communicative purposes and associated language functions are essential practical tools for effective interpersonal communication (Toba & Rijal, 2023). Communication is an integral component of all forms of spoken and written language. As a global language, English has become the primary means for English speakers to secure professional opportunities (Silaen et al., 2022). The unprecedented growth of the global economy, coupled with improved living conditions and societal progress, has fuelled the thriving development of the business sector, which has emerged as a pivotal economic force for many nations. Consequently, Zhu (2008) pointed out that the need for proficient communication in English has escalated, particularly within the context of business-oriented endeavours. Indeed, effective communication or relevant communicative strategies and skills are highly sought-after in various sectors, including business, tourism, medical and nursing care, and legal proceedings. (Skrynnikova & Grigorieva, 2019) In the business field specifically, communication skills are of paramount importance, as they can determine the success or failure of commercial endeavours and professional relationships. When conducting business internationally, effective communication is essential for negotiating contracts, fostering collaborative partnerships, and building trust with clients. A communication gap arises when employees from nations where English is not the primary language or who lack proficiency in English encounter difficulties in their day-to-day business operations and interactions (Fujio, 2018). For example, Syrian employees working in the

business sector in Arabian Gulf countries such as the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar often face challenges communicating effectively with their local or international counterparts. Collaborative learning has been found to enhance learners' motivation, knowledge retention, and communication skills. Many researchers have found Collaborative Learning as an enhancing approach that promotes the development of personal responsibility, interpersonal skills, and equal opportunities for participation and learning among group members (Laal et al., 2013)(Groeneveld et al., 2020)(Rister & Bourdeau, 2021). By encouraging active engagement, shared problem-solving, and peer-to-peer support, collaborative learning approaches foster a more inclusive and empowering learning environment. This can lead to improved language proficiency, greater confidence in communicative abilities, and better preparation for real-world professional interactions (Ranggi et al., 2021).

This study aims to explore the impact of collaborative learning approaches on the development of communicative strategies among participants in an English for Specific Purposes Business training course for Syrian learners.

Literature Review:

Collaborative learning is an instructional approach where learners share responsibility for achieving a common objective. It motivates learners to cooperate for the advantage of the group and their individual growth. By working together on a shared task, learners can fulfil their own goals and aspirations (Laal, 2013). While peer feedback is a key component of collaborative learning, where learners provide constructive feedback on each other's work. This can help learners develop critical thinking skills, enhance their understanding of the subject matter, and improve their communication abilities (Lam & Habil, 2020).

Collaborative learning is a group-based instructional approach where learners cooperatively engage in knowledge sharing and construction. It relies on the reciprocal exchange of socially structured information among participants. Each learner is accountable for their own learning and is motivated to support the learning of others with comparable abilities.(Kirk, 2001) Collaborative learning is a substantial departure from the traditional lecture- or teacher-cantered environment found in college classes. The lecture/listening/note-taking process may not entirely vanish in collaborative classrooms. Still, it coexists with other methods built on student conversation and active engagement with the course material. Teachers who employ collaborative learning strategies often consider themselves professional intellectual experience designers for their students rather than expert knowledge transmitters, coaches or midwives of a more emergent learning process (Wiske et al., 2001). Collaborative learning is supported by social constructivist theory, which views learning as a socially constructed process. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which highlights the role of social interaction in cognitive development, provides a strong theoretical foundation for collaborative learning. (Zhang, 2023). There exists some ambiguity regarding the distinction between cooperative learning and collaborative learning approaches (Song & Song, 2023). While these two methods may appear similar initially, cooperative learning is considered a subcategory of the broader collaborative learning framework. The key difference lies in the degree of individual accountability and group interdependence. In cooperative learning, each group member is responsible for a specific aspect of the learning and achievement process, as well as the overall success of the group. To ensure that all team members comprehend the learning objectives, they must leverage their collective knowledge and resources. This dynamic is often likened to the cast and crew of a theatrical production, where the performance's success hinges on the interconnected functions of all participants, though a director closely oversees the project (Bickerstaff, 2008). Collaborative learning, on the other hand, encourages a higher level of group interdependence, where the entire team works together to complete a shared goal or task (Siciliano, 2001). An example of collaborative learning in the context of organizational roles can be seen in software development, where a team of inexperienced developers is tasked with learning and utilizing a new framework to construct a portion of a program. While each developer is responsible for writing their share of the code, the effectiveness of their work depends on how well they understand and execute their individual tasks. Even though everyone in the team plays a unique role, their individual success is inextricably linked to the success of the others. In collaborative learning, individual participants are similarly responsible for the learning and success of their team. However, they also have the autonomy to determine their own responsibilities, resources, and organizational structure. This self-directed nature of collaborative learning is a key distinction, as there is no overarching director or authority figure governing the norms of interaction (Ellis & Hafner, 2007).

Student team achievement (STAD) is one of the teaching strategies of Collaborative learning involves learners being responsible not only for their own learning but also for supporting their teammates' learning (Matthews et al., 1995). It emphasizes that the team's goals depend on all members learning collaboratively. The student team

achievement method, which has been widely used in collaborative learning research, was employed in this study. This method consists of four parts:

1. Direct Teaching: The teacher provides direct instruction to the learners in the ESP business training course.
2. Group Learning: Learners are grouped heterogeneously and practice the content taught by the teacher.
3. In-class tests: The teacher conducts tests in class to assess learning outcomes.
4. Group recognition: Each individual's progress score is calculated and converted into group points, and the group with the most points is recognized.

Student team achievement method effectively enhances learners' English pronunciation and communication skills. The collaborative nature of the approach motivates learners to achieve correct pronunciation, while the timely feedback from group members further improves their learning outcomes (Lai et al., 2007).

Communicative strategies refer to the options that two conversational partners select to transmit the intended message when they face communicative challenges (Vandergrift, 1997)(House & Savignon, 2009). The learning of communicative strategies is crucial for learners of English for Specific Purposes, especially in the context of business and management communication (Maleki, 2007). Collaborative learning activities can significantly improve learners' development of communicative strategies by providing opportunities for authentic communication, feedback, and negotiation of meaning (Meyers, 1988). Instructors can design collaborative learning activities that encourage learners to negotiate meaning, ask for clarification, rephrase, and use other communicative strategies when faced with communicative breakdowns (Meadan et al., 2006). By working together in groups, learners can learn from observing their peers utilize various communicative strategies and incorporate those strategies into their own communication (Price, 1991). Collaborative learning approaches have been found to be particularly effective in improving the communication skills of English as Foreign Language learners (Azizinezhad et al., 2013).

Many researchers worked on the effect of the collaborative learning approach on communication skills of EFL learners. In a quasi-experimental study involving 105 Canadian university students, Han's findings indicated that the collaborative learning approach afforded learners enhanced opportunities for learning, which in turn improved their language fluency and oral proficiency. (Han, 2015). Huang, (2023) conducted a 12-week study that employed collaborative learning techniques, such as group discussions and presentations, with 60 EFL learners in a course of an ESP tour guide language training program at a national hospitality and tourism university in Taiwan. The researchers found that the collaborative learning activities significantly improved the learners' communication skills, particularly in terms of pronunciation, fluency, vocabulary, and grammar. Some researchers have also found that the introduction of collaborative learning techniques resulted in significant development of learners' oral language skills when using 90 university students in Iran as subjects (Namaziandost et al., 2019). Other researchers, such as Pattanpichet, found that collaborative learning facilitated the improvement of learners' oral language skills in a study of 35 university students in basic English courses in Thailand (Pattanpichet, 2011).

This study aims to examine the influence of collaborative learning approaches on the communicative strategies employed by Syrian learners who work in the Arabian Gulf countries in English for business and management training course.

Methodology:

Course Design:

This study employed a mixed-method research design to investigate the impact of collaborative learning on the communicative strategies utilized by participants in the English for Business and Management virtual course. Based on an assessment of EFB learners' communicative strategies, 9 topics were selected from the Market Leader English Business Course Book. The English for Business and Management training course, comprising a total of 27 hours, covered the following topics, (Table 1) with each one taught weekly for 2 hours. The additional 9 hours were dedicated to implementing communicative strategies and actively supporting the students to practice them as mentioned in (table 2) beyond the specific topics listed in (Table 1). The time duration of the course combined nine business English topics and nine communicative strategies covered in the syllabus. This structure suggests a

balanced approach to developing both language skills and practical communication techniques relevant to the business context.

Table 1: Topic covered in the English for Business and Management virtual course

Week 1	Talk about your travel experiences
Week 2	Discuss attitudes to change in general and at work
Week 3	Talk about status within an organization
Week 4	Discuss authentic advertisements
Week 5	discusses attitudes to money
Week 6	Discuss the importance of cultural awareness in business
Week 7	Talk about job interviews
Week 8	Discuss the development of international markets
Week 9	Discuss questions of ethics at work

Table 2: communicative strategies covered in the English for Business and Management virtual course

Week 1	Active Listening
Week 2	Non-Verbal Communication
Week 3	Persuasion and Negotiation Strategies
Week 4	Politeness and Professionalism
Week 5	Repair Strategies
Week 6	Code-Switching
Week 7	Mitigation Strategies
Week 8	Intercultural Communication
Week 9	Questioning Techniques

Data Collection:

The study involved 22 Syrian learners who participated in English for Business and Management virtual course. All the learners were staying and working in various business domains in the Arabian Gulf Area. The learners had similar English proficiency levels, as assessed by the British Council English Score mobile application, with all participants falling within the intermediate B1 range. The group comprised 10 male learners and 12 female learners.

The purpose of the course is to equip learners with effective English communicative strategies, enabling them to thrive in the international business domain. All participants were voluntarily enrolled in the nine-week English for Business and Management course. Therefore, they were highly interested in the course's collaborative strategies and techniques. The course specifically focused on developing their speaking and listening fluency, as well as their mastery of communicative strategies and their application to foster effective business communication.

After the end of the course, a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire was administered to examine the participants' perception of the effectiveness of the collaborative learning approach in enhancing their communicative strategies mentioned in (table 2). The participants were asked to select options ranging from (extremely disagree 1) to (extremely agree 5). Moreover, 10 participants took part in semi-structured interviews to provide more in-depth insights into their learning experiences and the challenges encountered during the course.

Data Analysis:

The collected data was analysed quantitatively using SPSS descriptive analysis to measure the means and the standard deviations of the learners' agreement on the effectiveness of collaborative learning on communicative strategies implemented in the course. The qualitative data from the semi-structured interviews was analysed through hypothetical thematic analysis after a transcription of the participants' responses in the semi-structured interview to provide a deeper understanding of the learners' perspectives and experiences.

Results:

The results from the questionnaire indicate that the participants had a highly positive perception of the collaborative learning approach used in the English for Business and Management course.

Table 3: Case Processing Summary

		N	%
Cases	Valid	22	100.0
	Excluded ^a	0	.0
	Total	22	100.0

a. Listwise deletion based on all variables in the procedure.

The analysis included all 22 valid cases without any missing or incomplete data. No cases were excluded from the analysis. Exclusions typically occur when there is missing data or when certain cases do not meet the inclusion criteria. The total number of cases processed equals the number of valid cases, as no cases were excluded.

Table 4: Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.961	12

The Cronbach's Alpha value of .961 indicates that the 12 items in the scale demonstrate excellent internal consistency, meaning they are highly correlated and effectively measure the underlying construct. The number of items in the scale is also an important factor, as longer scales tend to yield higher Cronbach's Alpha values.

Based on the interpretation guidelines, a Cronbach's Alpha of .961 suggests the scale has excellent reliability, implying the 12 items consistently assess the intended concept or construct. This high level of reliability enhances confidence in the validity of the results obtained from the scale.

Table 5: Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Q1	22	1.00	5.00	4.0000	1.15470
Q2	22	2.00	5.00	4.0455	1.21409
Q3	22	1.00	5.00	4.0455	1.09010
Q4	22	1.00	5.00	4.0455	.99892
Q5	22	1.00	5.00	4.0455	1.17422
Q6	22	2.00	5.00	4.0000	1.02353
Q7	22	2.00	5.00	3.9545	.89853
Q8	22	1.00	5.00	4.0909	1.15095
Q9	22	2.00	5.00	4.0909	1.06499
Q10	22	3.00	5.00	4.1818	.73266
Q11	22	3.00	5.00	4.2727	.70250
Q12	22	3.00	5.00	4.0909	.68376
Valid N (listwise)	22				

The study involved 22 participants who completed all 12 questions. The response range for most questions spanned the full Likert scale, except for Q10, Q11, and Q12, which had fewer low-end ratings. The average responses were generally high, with most means close to 4.0, indicating that participants provided positive feedback overall. The

standard deviations reveal varying levels of response consistency, with lower values indicating more agreement and higher values suggesting greater variability in opinions. Q11 had the highest mean, suggesting it received the most positive feedback from participants. Q7 had the lowest mean, though it was still relatively high, close to 4, indicating generally positive ratings across all questions. Q12 showed the least variability in responses, indicating strong agreement among participants. Q2 had the highest variability, suggesting differing opinions or perceptions regarding that particular item. The high mean ratings across the questionnaire items indicate that participants generally agreed or strongly agreed with the survey content. The observed variability in some responses may reflect differing personal experiences or perspectives related to specific aspects of the collaborative learning approach. The consistently high Cronbach's Alpha value demonstrates the high internal reliability of the assessment scale, enhancing confidence in the validity of the results.

Table 6: Thematic Analysis Coding Scheme and Hypothetical Frequencies.

Theme	Code	Definition	Frequency
Overall Perception of the Course	Positive Feedback	Comments expressing satisfaction with the course structure or content.	12
	Negative Feedback	Comments indicating dissatisfaction or unmet expectations.	3
	Mixed Feedback	Comments reflecting both positive and negative aspects of the course.	5
Difficulties in Language Learning	Listening Challenges	Struggles with understanding spoken English due to accents, speed, or technical vocabulary.	8
	Speaking Challenges	Issues with oral fluency, pronunciation, or confidence in speaking.	10
	Time Constraints	Difficulty managing time between work, study, and personal responsibilities.	7
Course Relevance and Accessibility	Relevant Content	Comments highlighting the applicability of course content to real-life or professional contexts.	14
	Out-dated/Irrelevant Resources	Mention of materials not aligning with participants' needs or current professional trends.	6
Practical Application in Real-Life Scenarios	Professional Context Skills	Improvement in skills directly applicable to workplace communication.	9
	Social Interaction Skills	Enhanced ability to use English in casual or everyday interactions.	7
Learner Support	Instructor Feedback	Mention of the quality or availability of feedback provided by the instructor.	8
	Peer Interaction	Comments on collaboration and	6

and Engagement		support from fellow participants.	
	Safe Learning Environment	Perception of feeling comfortable and supported during the course.	4
Recommendations for Future Enhancements	Additional Speaking Activities	Suggestions for more practice sessions or conversation-based activities.	5
	Improved Flexibility	Request for adjustments to class schedules or deadlines.	3
Impact on Learner Confidence	Increased Confidence	Comments reflecting greater self-assurance in using English after the course.	8
	Remaining Challenges	Mention of on-going struggles or areas where improvement is still needed.	4

The qualitative data from the semi-structured interviews further supports the quantitative findings, providing deeper insights into the participants' learning experiences. The interview data highlights the positive impact of collaborative learning on enhancing communication skills, fostering active engagement, and promoting a supportive learning environment.

Learner feedback from an English course reveals generally positive experiences, with 12 instances of positive feedback emphasizing satisfaction. However, areas for improvement emerged, including unmet expectations (3 instances of negative feedback) and mixed impressions (5 instances). Language learning difficulties, particularly in speaking (10 mentions) and listening (8 mentions), were prominent, alongside time constraints (7 mentions). Course relevance was largely perceived as practical (14 mentions), though some resources were deemed outdated (6 mentions). Workplace communication skills demonstrably improved (9 mentions). Learner support, including instructor feedback (8 mentions) and peer interaction (6 mentions), was viewed positively, yet some concerns about a fully safe and comfortable learning environment arose (4 mentions). Suggestions for improvement included increased speaking activities (5 mentions) and greater course flexibility (3 mentions). Increased confidence was a notable outcome (8 mentions), though some learners reported ongoing struggles (4 mentions). These findings underscore the need for targeted interventions addressing speaking practice, scheduling flexibility, and resource updates to enhance the learning experience.

The evidence from previous studies indicates that collaborative learning can be an effective approach for improving communication skills, particularly in English for Specific Purposes courses. The interactive and engaging nature of collaborative activities, along with the opportunity for peer-to-peer learning, were found to contribute to enhanced language proficiency and intrinsic motivation.

Conclusion:

The findings of this study indicate that the collaborative learning approach implemented in the English for Business and Management course was effective in enhancing communication skills among the participants. The quantitative data from the survey questionnaire demonstrated high levels of student satisfaction, perceived social presence, and positive perceptions of the collaborative learning process. The high internal reliability of the assessment scale, as evidenced by the Cronbach's Alpha value, further strengthens the validity of the results. Moreover, The qualitative data from the semi-structured interviews provided additional insights, highlighting the key themes that emerged from the participants' experiences. Overall, the study findings suggest that the collaborative learning approach was successful in creating a supportive and engaging learning environment that fostered improved communication skills among the English for Business and Management students.

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