Original Paper

Strengths and Weaknesses of Applying Cooperative Learning in Foreign Language Classrooms: A Case Study of Arab Learners' Perspectives

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the strengths and weaknesses of implementing Cooperative Learning (CL) in language classrooms from learners' perspectives. Many studies have investigated the effect of CL on learners' L2 production, but fewer studies have been conducted to discover the strengths and possible weaknesses of applying CL. Therefore, this study is undertaken to investigate Saudi learners' views towards the strengths and weaknesses of implementing CL in foreign language classrooms. The participants are six low-level Saudi EFL learners enrolled in a general English course as part of their foundation year requirements. The participants were first given a language background questionnaire and a language proficiency test to determine their current proficiency levels. They were then exposed to CL in their language classes for a total of six hours, after which they were asked to take part in semi-structured interviews. The interviews were designed to gather the learners' opinions of using CL activities in classrooms after they had experienced the use of it. The study outlines the strengths and weaknesses of CL as reported by the participants. Based on the findings, the study highlights some teaching implications for language practitioners and provides suggestions for future research.

Keywords

cooperative learning, learners' perspective, foreign language classrooms

1. Introduction

Cooperative learning (CL) has been a topic of intensive investigation. Studies in this area have mainly looked at how language learners perceive CL (e.g., Alsanie & Sabir, 2019) or at how CL affects L2 learners' production (see Gonzales & Torres, 2016; Al-Tamimi & Attamimi, 2014; Kezoui, 2014;

Alhaidari, 2006). However, fewer studies have been conducted to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of applying CL from students' perspectives, especially in the Middle East. Studies that explored the strengths and weaknesses of CL in the Asian context (Ghufron & Ermawati, 2018; Chamisah, 2013) have outlined several strengths and weaknesses of applying CL in language classrooms. The common strengths of applying CL as reported by Ghufron and Ermawati (2018) include raising students' self-confidence and motivation, reducing students' nervousness, raising students' responsibility for learning, making new topics easier to learn, sharing information with others, and helping each other in finding ideas. On the other hand, the weaknesses of CL include that it is usually time-consuming, requires active participation from both teachers and students, is difficult to manage, and involves more preparation.

In light of the above, the present study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of CL by demonstrating the strengths and weaknesses of using CL in foreign language classrooms from Saudi EFL learners' perspectives. Through semi-structured interviews, we aim to answer the following research questions.

1-   From Saudi learners' perspectives, what are the strengths and weaknesses of applying CL in EFL classrooms?

2-   From Saudi learners' perspectives, how can CL be enhanced in EFL classrooms?

The paper first presents a background on CL and CL studies in language teaching. The details of the current study including the participants, methods, and procedure, are given next, followed by presentation of the results. Finally, a discussion of the results in light of pedagogical implications is presented.

2. Cooperative Learning: Background

Cooperative learning (CL) classrooms use current student-centred classroom practices that encourage the spirit of group interaction and members are highly encouraged to work together, associate, and share knowledge to achieve a given task successfully. This approach is considered the core of CL and is usually referred to as "positive interdependence" (Gonzales & Torres, 2016; Cavanagh, 2011; Johnson & Johnson, 1988). Gillies, Ashman and Terwel (2011) defined Cooperative Learning as an educational approach that allows learners with different levels of competence to interact and work together through organised groups to complete an academic task. CL can be applied in classrooms using several strategies such as Jigsaw, Reciprocal Teaching (RT), Think-Pair-Share, Group Investigation, and more. Thus, the choice of the appropriate CL method relies on the teachers as they must determine which method best suits their students (Cohen, Brody, & Sapon-Shevin, 2004).

However, it should be noted that dividing students into groups is not the only way CL is applied. That is, there are certain criteria to follow in organising CL groups to achieve the required academic target. The common criteria for CL groups include positive interdependence, face-to-face promotive interaction, individual accountability, social skills, and group processing, as discussed in several studies

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(Almulla, 2017; Ifeoma, Ngozi, & Nkem, 2015; Farzaneh & Nejadansari, 2014; Kezoui, 2014; Alhaidari, 2006; Cohen, Brody, & Sapon-Shevin, 2004; Hamm, 1992; Johnson & Johnson, 1988).

According to Johnson and Johnson (1988), Social Interdependence Theory (SIT) is the underpinning theory behind CL as it provides a theoretical framework in which the five elements of CL are based. SIT emphasizes how an individual's performance can affect group performance and states that the way teachers organise determines on how the group members interact (Almulla, 2017; Gillies, Ashman, & Terwel, 2011). Johnson and Johnson (1988) further state that applying SIT pedagogically helps promote positive participation by the learners that results in higher academic and social progress. This can be achieved through positive interdependence which is one of the five elements of CL introduced earlier. The current study uses the RT method of CL, which is considered a fair example of positive interdependence since it involves positive interaction among the members of the group to achieve a given task.

3. Cooperative Learning in Language Teaching

Many of the studies that have examined cooperative learning in language teaching have either looked at how applying CL can affect learners' L2 production, how CL is perceived by students and/or teachers, or what the strengths and weaknesses of applying CL can be. Alhaidari (2006) studied the performance of 11-year-old L2 Arab learners of English. In particular, he looked at how CL activities can affect the learners' reading production. Using a quasi-experimental design, the findings showed that the experimental group outperformed the control group in vocabulary and fluency.

Almulla (2017) examined the perception of CL by Saudi teachers and students. The students took part in questionnaires, interviews, and classroom observations while the teachers only participated in the study through interviews after receiving a training course on using CL in classrooms. The results showed that both teachers and students had positive attitudes towards applying CL in class. Another study by Farzaneh and Nejadansari (2014) investigated the perception of Iranian learners of English towards applying CL in language classrooms. The researchers provided participants with a five-week intervention period using a method the Jigsaw method of CL. After the intervention period ended, the participants were given a survey questionnaire to fill out. The findings reveal that participants' views supported the implementation of CL in class.

Along the same lines, Hamm (1992) conducted research on the perception and attitudes of native speakers towards implementing CL in class. The participants were first taught elements of CL on a regular basis. They were then given surveys three times as pre, post, and delayed post questionnaires. The results of the immediate post questionnaire revealed positive views of the participants unlike the delayed post questionnaire. The negative perception found in the delayed post questionnaire might be attributable to the difficulty some participants faced while working with members of the group and the fact that they had to fill out the same questionnaire three times. For this reason, Hamm (1992) suggested that future research should include interviews to reach a better understanding of the

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participants' perspectives towards CL.

Many studies have explored the pros and cons of applying CL and the possible strengths and weaknesses of applying CL in language classrooms. For example, Gonzales and Torres (2016) taught 68 Filipino learners of English using CL in EFL classrooms. They used pre- and post-tests to see the effect of CL on the participants' performance and the participants' attitudes towards using CL. The learners were given attitude survey questionnaires and participated in interviews. Besides finding positive attitudes of the participants towards CL, the results also show some drawbacks of using CL reported by the participants. Some of the participants indicated that CL requires extra work and effort unlike individual work in class. Others stated that it is difficult to encourage other members of the group to continue working and finish in the required time.

Furthermore, Ghufron and Ermawati (2018) conducted a case study including Indonesian participants. They used questionnaires, in-depth interviews, and classroom observation as instruments in the study. As noted in the introduction, the common strengths of applying CL include raising students' self-confidence and motivation, reducing students' nervousness, raising students' responsibility for learning, making new topics easier to learn, sharing information with others, and helping each other in finding ideas. Conversely, the weaknesses of CL include that it is usually time-consuming, requires active participation from both teachers and students, is difficult to manage, and involves more preparation. Similarly, Chamisah (2013) evaluated the advantages of CL when teaching writing. She states that CL helps learners develop ideas to write about and helps them share and transfer information to others, resulting in better written communication.

In agreement with Ghufron and Ermawati (2018), the current study is designed to explore the possible strengths and weaknesses of applying CL in language classrooms from Saudi EFL learners' perspectives. CL intervention was given, and participants' responses were gathered through in-depth interviews. The details of the research methodology are given in the next section.

4. Methodology

4.1 Participants

The study's sample consisted of six female foundation year Saudi Arabic-speaking learners of English (mean age: 19). They take daily English classes as part of their foundation year required courses. The participants were given the Oxford Quick Placement Test and the majority scored at the A1/A2 level which indicates a low level of language proficiency. The students were then given a language background questionnaire showing that they were all Saudis with Arabic as their first language and the only language they can use fluently and that none had spent any time abroad. The questionnaire thus verified the homogeneity of the participants.

4.2 Instrument

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the main tool for the study. The interview questions are adapted and modified from Almulla (2017) (See Appendix). These interviews consisted of prepared

questions, but the format was open-ended, meaning that the interviewer was free to follow up with new questions during the interview session to elicit further information from the participants. The flexible and emergent nature of this type of interview helps create a relaxed atmosphere for respondents, elicits more detailed opinions of the target topic, and promotes exploration of feelings that cannot be identified ahead of time. It should be noted that all the sessions were conducted in the participants' first language, Arabic, and the questions in the interviews were translated to help the participants share their ideas freely and reveal their thoughts about CL with ease.

4.3 Intervention

To illicit responses from the learners in relation to the strengths and weaknesses of CL, Reciprocal Teaching (RT) was used in one classroom for six sessions that lasted an hour each. Reciprocal Teaching (RT), introduced by Palinscar and Brown (1984), is an instructional approach that involves teaching comprehension-fostering strategies using dialogue between the classroom teacher and the learners. Each lesson included a reading passage taken from the participants' textbook. The lesson also included some activities and related worksheets for students to use to practice the lesson. Before the start of each lesson, the learners were divided and arranged to sit in groups of two or three. The researcher explained the lesson using visual aids and prompts and informed the learners that only through working together could the group finish the lesson's exercises. For each new lesson, the researcher first asked the participants general questions about the topic and then asked them to open the lesson's page and read the title together. After that, the researcher pointed the students' attention to the numbered paragraphs in the text and assigned each group a specific paragraph to read and answer the related questions. The participants were given comprehension questions related to the text and a sheet assigning the different roles of each group member. These individual roles included identifying difficult words, looking for meaning or translation, summarizing, writing, reading the answers, and keeping track of time. To encourage the learners to finish the required task, the members of the group that was first to finish the activity with correct answers were rewarded with treats.

4.4 Procedure

The participants were first given a project information sheet to inform them about the main aim of the study and why they were chosen. Consent forms were then administered and collected. Subsequently, the participants were given a language background questionnaire that asked about their first language and other languages they spoke, if any. The students were then given the Oxford Quick Placement Test the results of which indicated that they are at the elementary level in English. The students were taught by one of the researchers using the Reciprocal Teaching method of CL, as explained above, for six sessions (six hours in total). To evaluate the strengths and weakness of applying CL, the participants took part in semi-structured interviews after they had attended all six sessions. Each participant was interviewed alone, and each interview lasted between 30 and 40 minutes.

4.5 Dara Analysis

The interviews were transcribed and saved in a separate Word document for each participant. Data were

carefully read several times to look for salient and recurring opinions and then categorised into themes generated from the learners' shared responses. With the use of the software program NVivo, a content analysis was conducted, and data were coded into common major themes together with corresponding subthemes to accurately track findings and report results.

5. Result

In the current study, semi-structured interviews were conducted to investigate the participants' opinions on the strengths and weaknesses of applying CL in language classrooms. The resulting data demonstrate four major themes that emerged from the answers to the research questions. These themes are *"strengths of applying CL", "weaknesses of applying CL in EFL classrooms", "enhancing CL in EFL classrooms"*, and *"grouping techniques in CL"*. Under these four main themes are other several related subthemes. Each major theme is displayed in a separate table with a brief description and the number of times it was mentioned by the participants followed by a description of the results presented in the table. Finally, a bar-chart that demonstrates the rate of recurrence of each subtheme is presented. Based on the findings, the main themes generated from the results provide answers to the research questions.

Strengths of applying CL

This major theme is displayed in Table 1 below. Identification of this theme is considered an answer to the first half of the first research question.

1- From Saudi learners' perspectives, what are the strengths and weaknesses of applying CL in EFL classrooms?

Table 1. Strengths of Applying CL in EFL Classrooms

Theme	Description	Mentions
Better understanding by helping each other	Students tend to understand better when they explain to each other	8
Delivering new ideas	Students welcome CL to receive new ideas	5
Seeing different personalities and making new friends	Students believe that CL enables them to meet new friends	4
Saves time and effort and finishes tasks faster	When working together, less time is needed and less effort is made	3

As can be seen in Table 1 above, the participants provided various ways CL can be beneficial from their own points of view. Most of them mentioned that working together in groups that involve CL helps them understand better. They said that sometimes they feel more comfortable asking each other about areas of difficulty rather than asking the class teacher. This impression is clearly shown in a statement

from Student 1: "Some things I couldn't understand from the teacher, but I got it from my friends in the group". Others stated that explaining parts of the lesson to their colleagues contributes to long term retention as it has been repeated and paraphrased. As put by Student 4, "When I get a point from my teacher and explain it to another student, this way it stays longer".

Another reported benefit of applying CL in class was receiving and sharing new ideas. Some participants believed that being put in groups and working together in class tends to be more beneficial as the chances of hearing different thoughts and discussing new ideas are greater than when working alone. For example, Student 4 stated that CL is beneficial "because sometimes we can exchange new information and share new ideas". Student 3 added that CL is beneficial when group members bring and share new ideas.

Moreover, a social aspect was among the perspectives that were expressed throughout the interviews. Most of the participants stated that CL was a great opportunity for them to meet different people and make new friends. They expressed how, before applying CL groups in the intervention, they did not know each other's names and had never spoken to one another even though they were at the midpoint of their academic term. As mentioned by Student 4, "I was able to make new friends, and I got to know their personalities in a way that I couldn't without being in a group". The participants reported that these groups were an important step in breaking the ice and removing the barriers between them as classmates. As Student 5 put it, "It breaks down the barriers between us". They said that for the first time since their course started, they had gotten to know each other and that from now on, they would continue being a group and working together in other courses as well. They have expressed how dull the classes were when every student had to attend the class and work individually without any sort of encouraging interaction.

Another common view amongst interviewees was that CL saves time and helps them finish the required tasks faster. They believe that when in a group, members can notify each other about the tasks that they have to answer and also keep track of time. For example, Student 5 said, "We can finish the tasks faster than when we work individually with less effort made". Student 6 mentioned that when working alone, she can get distracted easily, but when she becomes a member of a group, she is more focused. This is evident in the answer of Student 6: "It also helps to notify the members and bring them back on task".

Figure 1 below displays the participants' subthemes regarding "Positive attitudes towards CL" and the number of times each subtheme was mentioned.
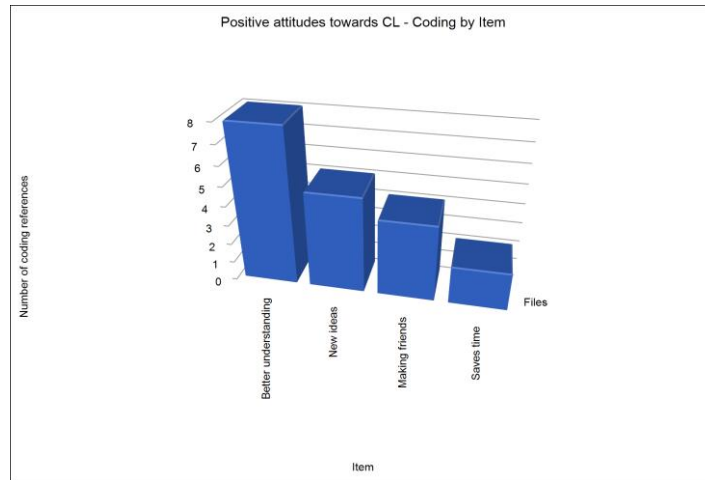
Figure 1. Strengths of Applying CL

Weaknesses of applying CL

Table 2 illustrates the second major theme that corresponds to the second half of the first research question:

1- From Saudi learners' perspectives, what are the strengths and weaknesses of applying CL in EFL classrooms?

Table 2. Weaknesses of Applying CL in EFL Classrooms

Theme	Description	Mentions
Discomfort, shyness, and fear of mistakes	Some students feel uncomfortable when participating with other members	5
Inflexibility in accepting different answers	Being biased to their own answers and doubting others' answers	5
Needs extra time thus slows down the learning process	Having to wait for members' answers may take too long	2
Tendency to depend on the excellent member	Passiveness of some less confident students/low achievers	1

Table 2 presents the interviewees' varied opinions regarding what can be considered drawbacks or downfalls of CL and learning through groups in class. Some of the participants believe that feeling shy when communicating with others in the group and the fear of making mistakes are obstacles that hinder participation and enjoyment of CL in class. As Student 3 put it, "Some students can get shy and embarrassed and afraid to make a mistake in front of the others". Moreover, they mentioned that difficult topics that no one can work with can raise the level of fear within the members, preventing successful collaboration in learning. Student 4 stated that CL was not helpful if the topic was very

difficult and no one knows how to answer.

Among the perspectives expressed about the drawbacks of CL were some aspects related to the behaviour of the members themselves. This statement is illustrated in the words of Student 6: "If the group members are not helpful and don't like to share, then it is not worthy". The interviewees reported that sometimes they are put with students who are not willing to help nor to share. These members may have trust issues and are not willing to accept answers from anyone but themselves. Believing that the only right answers are theirs, they start to doubt other members' contributions. This can be clearly seen in the answer of Student 5: "Some students are biased in their answers and think that only what they say is right and don't trust and accept the others' answers".

Another reported issue was that working together in groups could require some time and slows down the pace of the learning process especially when members have to wait for each other's answers. This argument is vividly expressed in the words of Student 4: "Sometimes it wastes time and slows down the pace of the work to wait for others' answers". Moreover, the level of responsibility of the members counts according to Student 3: "Some students in the group tend to give all the work to the best and most active students and just don't work themselves".

Figure 2 below presents the participants' subthemes regarding "weaknesses of applying CL in EFL classrooms" and the number of times they were mentioned.
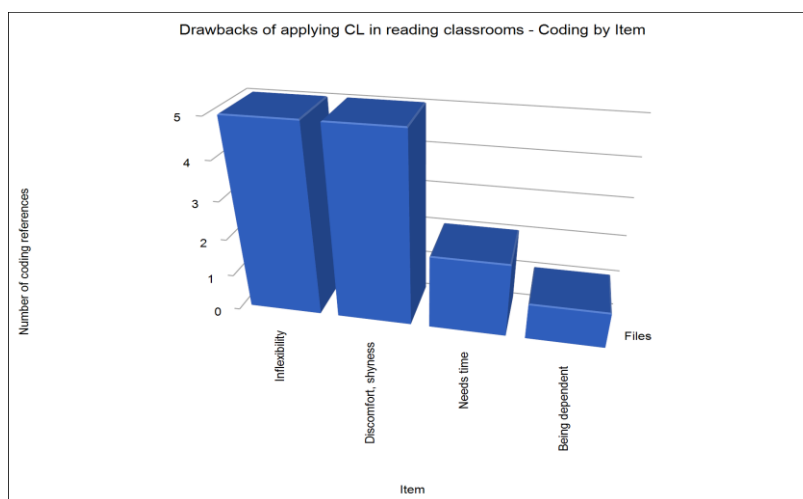

Figure 2. Weakness of Applying CL in EFL Classrooms

Enhancing CL in EFL classrooms

Table 3 below demonstrates the third main theme that answers the second research question:

2- From Saudi learners' perspectives, how can CL be enhanced in EFL classrooms?

Table 3. Enhancing CL in EFL classrooms

Theme	Description	Mentions
Assigning certain tasks to each group through worksheets	Teachers should provide students with guiding worksheets	8
Characteristics associated with members	Grouping should include a sense of responsibility, cooperation, excitement, respect, and openness	4
Teacher's role as a monitor and a facilitator	Teacher should guide the students and monitor their progress	4
Motivating rewards	The fastest group should be offered a reward	2
Accepting oral participation, not just written	Teacher should allow spoken discussions	1

Table 3 shows tools that could be applied to enhance CL in EFL classrooms according to the interviewees. The majority of the participants agreed that worksheets containing different activities related to the lesson should be given to each group to keep all members busy and working. For example, Students 2 noted that "assigning worksheets is important", and Student 4 reported that "Groups must be given worksheets to practice".

Among the suggestions that were mentioned as ways of enhancing CL was an aspect associated with the members themselves. Four of the participants believed that the members must have certain characteristics to foster CL and promote collaboration among group members. A sense of responsibility, cooperation, excitement, respect, and openness were among the characteristics mentioned. For example, Student 1 reported, "Members of the group must be helpful and cooperative. Each member must be responsible". Student 2 added, "Accepting and respecting each other's opinions without being biased for our own opinions".

Additionally, when asked about the different ways that can be used to enhance CL in class, most of the interviewees focused on the importance of the teacher's role in facilitating CL among the groups. As reported by the participants, the teacher should monitor the students while they work in groups, reexplain the tasks where needed, and encourage the students. As Student 5 put it, "The teacher must facilitate the process and explain to the ones who need help". Moreover, another interviewee felt that creating a comfortable atmosphere and a positive energy is one of the required roles of teachers in class to help the students who are insecure. This argument is illustrated in the words of Student 3: "Teachers should comfort the students and make it clear from the beginning that it is ok to make a mistake and raise their confidence".

Another suggestion made by the interviewees was giving motivating rewards to the group that finishes the required tasks first. These rewards could be chocolates or other sweets, a bonus, or any other little gifts. This idea is clearly evident in the speech of Student 4: "Teachers should provide students or winners with motivating rewards like treats or gifts".

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A final subtheme regarding ways to enhance CL was mentioned by one participant when she said that oral responses to the questions that are asked on the worksheets ought to be accepted by the teacher. She believes that answering orally may give the students a greater chance to participate when they focus less on spelling and accuracy. As Student 3 put it, "it is good to accept spoken and oral answers from the students and not just written because they may come up with a lot more when speaking and not writing".

Figure 3 below shows the participants' subthemes regarding "Enhancing CL in EFL classrooms" and the number of times they were mentioned.
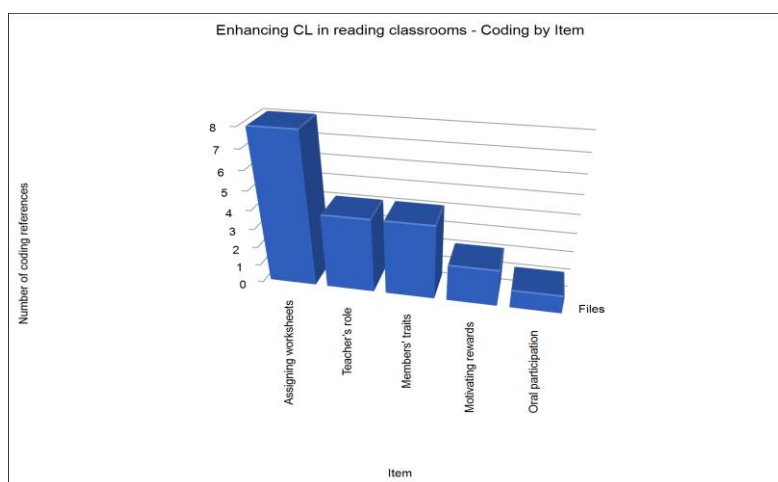

Figure 3. Enhancing CL in EFL Classrooms

Grouping techniques in CL

Additionally, the process of grouping the students in the right CL groups in the classrooms seems to be so important to the interviewees that it led to creating a separate theme. This major theme is considered an answer to the second research question:

2- From Saudi learners' perspectives, how can CL be enhanced in EFL classrooms?

Table 4. Grouping Techniques in CL

Theme	Description	Mentions
Wise distribution of members in the groups	Excellent/helpful students spread among groups	2
An assigned leader within each group	This is to help the members stay on task and keep track of time	2
Repeated groups throughout the term	Helps to break the ice and makes students know each other better	1

Data from Table 4 above relate to the importance of the teacher's effective creation of the CL groups in

class. According to the interviewees, CL grouping must involve several characteristics. For example, some participants mentioned that the excellent, active, and outgoing students must be put in different groups to help the shy, less confident students. As Student 4 mentioned, "excellent and confident students should be seated in different groups". Consequently, another participant suggested that there must be an assigned leader for each group. According to her, this leader would have important tasks that can help pull the group together to stay focused. Among these roles is to monitor the work of each member, keep track of time, and motivate the group as a whole. As stated by Student 3, CL worked best when "there was one responsible leader in each group to control and motivate them". One more thought proposed by an interviewee was to keep the same group members for several classes. She thought that this group consistency could let the students grow closer and help the members understand each other better. Student 1 indicated that "the same grouping must repeat itself so that members can fit and adapt". Overall, these results provide important insights into the participants' perspectives on CL groups in class.

Figure 4 below displays the participants' subthemes regarding "Grouping techniques in CL" and the number of times they were mentioned.
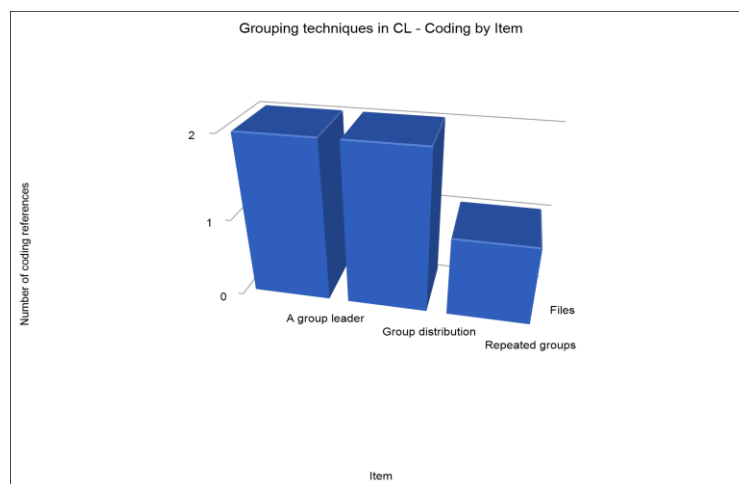

Figure 4. Grouping Techniques in CL

6. Discussion

The findings of this research are discussed in light of the two research questions.

From Saudi learners' perspectives, what are the strengths and weaknesses of applying CL in EFL classrooms?

Data collected from semi-structured interviews with six participants helped to answer the above research question. This question was answered through two major themes that are discussed below.

Strengths of applying CL

The majority of the interviewees indicated that they can understand the subject matter better when they explain parts of what they were taught to one another. An interesting finding was also noticed in the

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responses of the interviewees. Some participants stated that group work in CL classes saves time and helps to finish the assigned tasks faster. On the contrary, other respondents indicated that group work and CL approaches are possible reasons for the delay that can be witnessed in classrooms. As an answer to this conflict, both testimonies are logical and can be accepted considering the characteristics of the members those participants were sitting with. Some members are low achievers who may be less confident and more insecure and consequently, cannot be decisive in answering their parts which can hinder the flow of participation. On the other hand, other members have leading personalities that accompany their high understanding of the topic covered which makes them willing to solve others' problems to finish faster.

Moreover, a few respondents stated that working with other members in the group is beneficial when they share new ideas or get introduced to new ways of solving problems. This opinion is probably a result of various members having different previous knowledge, so the way they tackle problems or finish tasks would consequently vary. This finding matches that found by Gillies, Ashman, and Terwel (2011) who stated that meeting new partners in projects or being an active group member is a rich environment for exchanging information and observing new learning methods.

Weaknesses of applying CL in EFL classrooms

Although the majority of the participants held positive views of implementing CL activities in their EFL classroom, a small number had some reservations about this approach. A couple of interviewees mentioned that CL sessions require extra time from the original period due to the amount of work that the members are asked to do. Similar results are evident in Gonzales and Torres's (2016) study in which some of their participants favoured individual work over CL group work as group work is demanding and involves extra effort and more work.

Other interviewees did not feel comfortable working with other members in the group. This can be explained either by their shyness in interacting with others, that working in groups forces them out of their comfort zone, or due to the nature of members who can be unhelpful or prefer silence. These discomforts of CL groups were declared by few of the participants in a study by Hamm (1992) who stated that one reason for preferring to work alone and not engage with others in groups is when some members stop participating or depend on other members to finish the tasks for them. According to these students, this delays the completion of the group task and wastes time. They also added that it puts extra weight on their shoulders to have to constantly encourage those members to be more active and participate.

From Saudi learners' perspectives, how can CL be enhanced in EFL classrooms?

The answer to this research question was found in the responses of the interviewees. Interestingly, the interviewees came up with some suggestions for improvements that can serve as pedagogical implications for future studies.

Some participants indicated how distributing symbolic rewards can motivate the group members to work better and faster. This aspect can be directly linked to the human desire to receive rewards,

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making them push themselves to work harder. This belief is affirmed by the teacher-participants in the study of Almulla (2017) who believed that promising the learners simple rewards can encourage and motivate then and promote the quality of the assignments delivered. They added that to get a stronger effect, rewards should be given to all the members of the group as a whole and not to be given to individuals to assure the participation of all the members.

Another aspect mentioned by the participants is the characteristics of the members themselves. Some interviewees believed that for CL groups to work successfully, the members of the groups should possess certain of social skills that can help the group interact well. Among these are mutual respect, taking responsibility, cooperation, and giving support. If the members held the opposite of these traits; if they were uncooperative, passive, or unwilling to share information and give needed support, it would be unpleasant, and the learners would have negative views towards working in groups. The work of Lange, Costley and Han (2016) supports the previous claim. Based on their research, they believe that the correct interaction of members within a group can teach them how to care, listen to, and accept each other. The researchers stated that a successful communication between the learners can also be achieved with the teacher's guidance and support. Teachers can facilitate the flow of communication between members of small groups when they assign certain roles to each member and make rounds to monitor their work. By achieving this, the use of CL groups would not only promote learning and academic success, it would also strengthen the social relationships between the students and between the class teacher and her students. Teacher facilitation is easier with small groups that the teacher can monitor compared to the whole class in teacher-centred classrooms.

This point leads to discussing another related finding that created one of the themes of the qualitative data for the frequent mentions it was granted by the interviewees; "grouping techniques". Most of the interviewees had something to say about how the members of the groups should be distributed. Some of them mentioned that the groups must be heterogenous, consisting of students with varied abilities of language use. To them, that would allow better support from high-level to low-level students. The students would remind the class teacher not to put all excellent and active students in one group. Similar suggestions were found in other studies where the researchers proposed important attributes to be kept in the instructor's mind when distributing the learners of the class into groups. The group size, the amount of work assigned, and the positive social communication skills of the class members must all be considered and integrated to facilitate the success of CL groups (Farzaneh & Nejadansari, 2014; Gillies, Ashman, & Terwel, 2011). With regards to group size, Farzaneh and Nejadnsari (2014) stated that small groups to be more effective than pairs or the class as a whole since groups allow a practical exchange of information, knowledge, opinions, and ways to solve problems without causing noise or distraction. This approach works better when there is a match between the tasks required from the members and the time allotted for the activity.

Additionally, giving the members the freedom to choose their own groups was among the suggestions. This can benefit students with low social skills or the ones who have difficulty in making new friends

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and adapting to new groups. For those students, being in the same group for a number of sessions would help become more familiar with other group members, making them more comfortable. In accordance with the current result, the participants in a study by Hamm (1992) preferred to be kept in their existing groups rather than changing to new groups for the same reason.

7. Conclusion

Cooperative learning is rooted in student-centred approaches to teaching. This study aimed to explore the strengths and weaknesses of applying CL in EFL classrooms from Saudi learners' perspectives. Through semi-structured interviews, the study outlines several strengths and weaknesses as reported by the participants.

Strengths of applying CL included students having a better understanding, encountering new ideas, making new friends, and saving time. On the other hand, the weaknesses of using CL included fear of making mistakes in front of others, the consumption of time, and the tendency of lower-level students to rely on higher-level students. Suggestions for enhancing the use of CL in language classrooms include assigning motivating rewards, using extra worksheets, and ensuring that the teacher takes the role of facilitator. These results inform language practitioners and curriculum designers to pay more attention to the benefits of CL activities and provide motivation for teachers to employ CL more frequently in EFL classrooms. Consequently, language course books could integrate special activities to be completed in class that encourage different types of CL.

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Appendix

Interview Questions on Learners' Perspectives towards Cooperative Learning

Q1. Do you enjoy working with other students in groups? Why (not)?

Q2. What are some things that you have learned while working in groups?

Q3. Do you think using cooperative learning is beneficial for you academically in comparison with the standard individual performance? Why (not)?

Q4. Which factors do you think make cooperative learning work well?

Q5. In your opinion, what are the challenges or difficulties of using cooperative learning? What do you suggest overcoming these difficulties?