

SAUDI UNDERGRADUATE EFL STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS LERANING TOGETHER STRATEGY IMPLEMENTATION IN AN EFL READING COMPREHENSION COURSE

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Abstract

The importance of reading comprehension proficiency in enhancing the academic success, development and growth of students' logical, intellectual, critical, emotional, social aspects and linguistic competencies is well documented. However, there is poor performance by Saudi EFL learners in reading comprehension section at both TOEFL and IELTS tests. This might be attributed to the negative perceptions Saudi EFL learners have towards reading comprehension instruction. These negative perceptions held by Saudi EFL learners towards EFL reading comprehension instruction might be due to the fact that the majority of Saudi English as a foreign language of students have been taught by conventional teaching methods. Therefore, these negative perceptions may be modified positively by applying an effective teaching method like learning together strategy of cooperative learning that may be capable of improving students' academic achievement, perceptions and liking of EFL reading comprehension. This study aimed to investigate the effects of learning together strategy of cooperative learning on Saudi EFL undergraduate students' perceptions towards EFL reading comprehension. The pretest-posttest quasi-experimental design was employed since Qassim University departmental system does not allow randomization of individual students. Forty EFL third-level students of Unaizah Science and Arts College taking EFL Reading Comprehension course took part in this study. The students took a pre- learning together strategy survey, then they received a learning together strategy instruction and finally they took a post-learning together strategy survey. Results of this study revealed higher positive perceptions for students using learning together strategy in the post- learning together strategy than those in the pre-learning together strategy survey. The study concluded that learning together strategy of cooperative learning has several pedagogical implications for EFL reading comprehension instruction.

Keywords: Learning together strategy, EFL reading comprehension instruction, Perceptions

1. INTRODUCTION

Reading is a translation of written symbols into spoken words and the relationship between the written symbol and meaning (Al-Jarf, 2007). Generally speaking, In most undergraduate English as a foreign

language majoring departments, most significantly, the ultimate aim of English as a foreign language education is to acculturate students with English language major skills and to improve reading speed and comprehension of students in English (Buly & Valencia, 2002). Additionally, Beeson (2001) indicated that to complete successfully an academic program of study to become English teachers, students must be able to read, comprehend, and apply materials from textbooks and journals. On the one hand, reading comprehension, as simply defined by Koda (2007), is just a process and its main goal "is to construct text meaning based on visually encoded information" (Koda, 2007, p.1). On the other hand, reading is regarded as a complex cognitive activity especially for second or foreign language learners. While readers in first language use only one language, their native language, in the reading process, reading in second language requires learners to deal with at least two languages (Ovando, 2005). According to Carrell and Grabe (2002), L2 readers use different reading processes than L1 readers for the following reasons:

- the former group is limited in their linguistic knowledge;
- they do not have cultural and social knowledge that is common in the English context;
- they do not necessarily retain prior knowledge, which is the basis of understanding English materials;
- they study English for a variety of reasons, including accommodating English speaking countries and pursuing degrees in these countries; and
- they use both L1 and L2.

Due to these differences between L1 and L2, the L2 readers experience more challenges than the L1 readers (Koda, 2007). Reading a text in second or foreign language with comprehension becomes much harder and more complicated and sophisticated process (Hudson, 2007; García, 2003). As a result of the huge expansion of social media and foreign interconnectedness, mastering an adequate level of reading comprehension in English has been getting more crucial (Kern, 2006). However, there has been a continual decline in the average reading ability of college-aged students (Cook, 2006). It is important to realize that a positive student perceptions and attitudes towards the content of an instructional activity should be a critical goal for the teacher because there is a positive correlation between student perception and attitude from one side and student achievement from the other side (House & Keely, 1996).

Many EFL lecturers at English Department in Qassim University expressed in many different meetings that they are handicapped by the deficiency of ability required to inspire a genuine appreciation of EFL reading comprehension skills because of traditional lecturing instruction followed in EFL reading comprehension instruction that are not consistent with the instructional practices currently felt. Such traditional lecturing instructional method does not help classroom practice to obtain the level of informality and comfortable atmosphere necessary for a general passion of EFL reading comprehension to come through because contemporary theories of language learning stress the importance of student-centered learning where much learning is done through peer-to-peer interaction (Abdulla & Jacobs, 2004).

In EFL reading comprehension classroom instruction, the problem of student perception and attitude – student achievement relationship can be addressed through collaborative learning which has been lauded by educators as effective in promoting the cognitive and linguistic development of learners (McGroathy, 1993; Kagan, 1995). Collaborative learning is a comprehensive approach to teaching that encompasses key assumptions about what students should learn and how they should learn it (Johnson & Johnson, 1994). The advantages of collaborative learning over individual work include greater learning gains, higher order thinking, better self-images and increased prosocial behavior (Thomson & Tayman, 1996). Moreover, collaborative learning tends to result in deeper student learning and more positive attitudes towards schooling, their subjects of study and toward themselves because of its prowess to promote group socialization and cohesiveness while decreasing prejudicial attitudes, thus fostering self-esteem and increasing ability to see another's perspective (Felder, 1995).

In most of Saudi undergraduate EFL programmes, the development of positive perceptions remains an ongoing challenge to lecturers of reading comprehension courses because most undergraduate EFL students lack the positive perceptions and required motivation to learn in this genre. In this respect, EFL reading comprehension instruction can make many benefits from the inclusion of a Learning together strategy of collaborative learning in that it allows the lecturer to organize instruction according to the principles of positive interdependence, individual accountability, promotive face-to-face interaction, group processing, and social and collaborative skills (Chemwei, Kiboss & Ilieva, 2005).

The main advantage of learning together strategy over other collaborative learning models is that it is less prescriptive and unlike other collaborative learning models it does not employ specific steps in lesson planning and strategies in a prescribed manner. Moreover, it provides a conceptual framework that can be tailored to meet the lecturers' circumstances, students' needs and school contexts (Kluge, McGuire, Johnson & Johnson, 1999). Therefore this study adopted the use of learning together strategy in the EFL reading comprehension instruction with the goal of determining its potential to improve undergraduate EFL students' perceptions towards EFL reading comprehension that is reported to be a major challenge for EFL lecturers in Saudi Arabia. Accordingly, addressing the effect of learning together strategy on undergraduate EFL students' perceptions towards reading comprehension has become necessary.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A great deal of attention has been paid nowadays to EFL reading comprehension instruction. When instruction occurs in a small group setting, English as a foreign language learners have more opportunities to interact with both their lecturer and other students in the group in a low-anxiety environment; it is also much easier for the lecturer to check for understanding and personalize instruction to meet the needs of his or her individual students (Kendall & Khuon, 2005). One way lecturers can teach EFL reading comprehension is through learning together strategy which can provide students with authentic opportunities to practice English and communicate with their peers.

"Learning Together" was a cooperative learning strategy explored by Gungor and Un Acikoz (2011). Attitudes towards reading were also researched. Typically, when students have a difficulty in an area, they tend to develop a negative attitude. Cooperative learning helps promote positive attitudes and therefore can be a possible solution to improving comprehension. "Learning Together" was used to transform passive readers to active readers and processors while promoting positive attitudes towards reading. There were 56 sixth grade participants in this study. Treatment lasted for 30 hours. Results showed that students in the cooperative learning setting employed more learning strategies. This may be due to increased interactions in groups. Students were able to "observe each other reading, explaining, questioning, criticizing and thinking aloud" (p.498). No much data was presented by Gungor and Un Acikoz (2004). Though it was found that participants in a cooperative learning setting employed more comprehension strategies, there was no direct relationship made between increasing strategy use and improving comprehension.

According to the results of the above discussed studies, it is clearly proved that the more students work in cooperative learning groups, the better they will learn, the easier the retention of the material will be, and the better they will feel about themselves, the class, and their classmates. Moreover, cooperative learning involves "students working together in small groups to accomplish shared goals" (Gillies, 2007, p. 1). The students support each other to improve the learning of everyone in the group (Jolliffe, 2007). Cooperative learning elements include positive interdependence, individual accountability, group processing, small-group and interpersonal skills, and face-to-face interaction (Jolliffe, 2007). Through cooperative grouping of students, the theory of positive social interdependence, a vital component to meeting the needs of all learners, is nurtured (Johnson & Johnson, 2002; I. C. King, 2003). Positive social interdependence is said to have occurred when group members work collaboratively to achieve a common goal (Johnson & Johnson, 1994, 2002).

To sum up, the literature review suggests that instructional intervention is an important factor that influences students' reading comprehension achievement. The current study is a simple step toward understanding how the cooperative learning strategy of learning together instructional intervention conditions within the undergraduate EFL reading comprehension classroom can affect students' perceptions towards the utility of learning together strategy in an EFL reading comprehension course. For this study, the theory of positive social interdependence is examined by using cooperative learning strategy of Learning Together in one undergraduate EFL third-level reading comprehension classroom.

3. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Generally speaking, there are unfortunately many Saudi EFL learners in different educational stages, primary, intermediate, secondary and higher education, who are not good readers. This, of course, could have a negative impact on the students' academic achievement in other academic domains in general. The ultimate aim of most EFL educators in Saudi Arabia is to have their students reading at their own required level or above. To have students reading at below required level of reading is not desired, and something has to be done to change this. Consequently, most EFL educators have the intention and will to help their students to be good readers and have positive perceptions towards EFL reading comprehension, but they are not sure how to help and what are the best instructional strategies they can follow to help their students

to become better readers. Additionally, in recent years, an emphasis on higher TOEFL, IELTS and other test scores has pushed Saudi EFL educators to look for different reading comprehension instructional strategies other than the traditional lecturing instruction. The present study used the learning together strategy in order to improve Saudi undergraduate EFL students' reading comprehension, help them increase their positive perceptions towards EFL reading comprehension and their desire to read.

4. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The main purpose of this study was to examine the effectiveness of learning together strategy that included the use of rewards, structured group processing, and training of undergraduate EFL students in group processes and interactive skills, periodic tests, assigning roles to experimental group members as well as summing up scores for peer groups to improve students' perceptions towards EFL reading comprehension. Taking into account the demonstrated benefits and advantages of learning together strategy in the foreign language classroom, the researchers in this study had the assumption that successful application of learning together strategy entails that EFL lecturers have a sufficient understanding of the benefits and advantages of cooperative learning and group work, as well as the required skills to employ it on any educational stage. Moreover, they believed that undergraduate EFL students' perceptions towards learning together strategy have a significant impact on whether or not they choose to get involved in group activities in their EFL reading comprehension instruction. Yet little research has been done in the Saudi educational context to investigate the perceptions of Saudi undergraduate EFL students concerning cooperative learning in general and learning together strategy in particular and whether they believe it is applicable in the context of the EFL reading comprehension classroom. Therefore, in order to address this gap in the up-to-date knowledge and to gain insight into the current use of constructivist different methods in EFL reading comprehension instruction in Saudi Arabia, the researchers sought to answer the following research question:

5. RESEARCH QUESTION

The focus of this study was to explore the Saudi undergraduate EFL third-level students' perceptions of the utility of the learning together strategy in improving their EFL reading comprehension achievement. More exactly, the study tried to answer the following question:

"After learning together instruction, what are undergraduate EFL experimental group students' perceptions of the utility of Learning Together instruction in improving their reading comprehension achievement?"

For this research question, the pre post learning together strategy questionnaires were used to show the undergraduate EFL statistical change of students' perceptions before and after the learning together strategy usage.

6. THE OBJECTIVE OF THE RESEARCH

This study was conducted to investigate the perceptions of second-year university EFL students enrolled in ENG 235 course in the first semester of 2016/2017 academic year at Unaizah Science and Arts College, at Qassim University, concerning the utility of learning together strategy in improving their reading comprehension achievement.

7. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH

The findings of this research are likely to offer some contributions to:

- 1) The EFL lecturers who can use the learning together strategy not only in teaching reading comprehension but in teaching EFL in general as well. By using this strategy, they can offer their students incentive, effective, efficient and cooperative learning atmosphere in which students help each other within the group.
- 2) The EFL students who can practice learning together strategy in their learning of other English as foreign language skills other than reading.
- 3) The researchers who are interested in studying the effects of different cooperative learning strategies on developing other EFL skills.

8. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

While qualitative research relies on words and images, quantitative research relies on numbers and statistics (Creswell, 2007). Data collected in quantitative research come from measuring instruments (Creswell, 2007). Additionally, the researcher explains the problem. He or she explains how one variable affects another or the relationship between the two (Creswell, 2007). As Foss and Ellefsen (2002) stated, the researcher uses

explanations to form a generalization. Quantitative educational researchers, therefore, look to take research from one setting and apply it to similar settings in different classrooms, schools, districts, states, or parts of the country. This section deals with the research design, treatments, and instrument used in this research.

9. RESEARCH DESIGN

This study was an experimental research in which pretest-posttest design was used. This quantitative study was carried out in the EFL reading comprehension course (ENG 235), a three-credit course, over the first semester of 2016/2017 academic year. Eight units were assigned for study for the period of the full first semester. These units were selected from *Reading Power*, Mikulcky, B & Jeffries, L. (2005). A pre-post learning together strategy survey was employed. The sample involved 40 EFL second-year students from Unaizah Science and Arts College who were enrolled in English Reading course (ENG 235) with the researcher as the lecturer. Forty students were assigned as the experimental group. The experimental group received learning together instruction. All group members had the same learning materials, schedule, tests, and lecturer. The experimental design for this study is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of the Experimental Design of the Research Study

Group	Instructional Methods	Pre-Test/Procedures	Treatments	Post-Test/Procedures
Experimental group	Learning together instruction	Pre-Learning together strategy survey	Receiving "learning together instruction"	.Post-Learning together strategy survey

10. TREATMENT: LEARNING TOGETHER INSTRUCTION

The experimental group was exposed to learning together instruction. The experimental group students were divided into small heterogeneous groups of four members based on their pretest marks at the beginning of the treatment. In the first two weeks of the treatment, the lecturer spent about 20 minutes every week showing students how to practice learning together strategy via illustration and training. In the learning together instruction classroom, students were told to preview the unit text and prepare their individual questions before the reading comprehension class, and then bring their pre-prepared individual questions to class for working and learning together. In the course of working together, group members simplified and explained word meanings and puzzling texts, and after that involved in a conversation to decide the proper answers to their pre-prepared questions. Throughout group negotiations, the lecturer assisted students in working out any misunderstandings, gave feedback, and guided discussions. After a group discussion, students were stimulated to ask questions on the reading comprehension text they had read, and the lecturer presented a short-term lecture to explain any unclear text and answer their questions. Lastly, students were tested individually with a unit reading comprehension exercise prepared by the lecturer.

11. INSTRUMENTATION: LEARNING TOGETHER STRATEGY QUESTIONNAIRE

At the beginning and the end of the learning together instruction treatment, the EFL undergraduate experimental group students were requested to complete the Learning Together Strategy Survey to expose their visions on the use of the learning together strategy instruction, which consisted of thirteen 5-point Likert-type items and four factors: (1) active learning, (2) group discussion, (3) views of learning together strategy, (4) interaction.

12. DATA ANALYSIS

The collected data were saved onto a personal computer and transferred to a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. The Excel spreadsheet, in turn, was imported into SPSS software, which was utilized to code and analyze the data. Data on the perceptions of Saudi undergraduate EFL third-level students were used to address the research question. Chi-square analysis is based on the comparison of observed frequencies in a certain category with the frequencies that may be expected by chance (Field, 2009; Morgan, Leech, Gloeckner, & Barrett, 2007). The strength of the relationship between variables, known as the effect size, was measured using Phi and Cramer's V. Cross tabulations and chi-square analysis were conducted to analyze the data collected.

13. RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH

The Learning Together Strategy Survey asked the EFL undergraduate experimental group students to compare their earlier expertise with traditional lecture instruction and their expertise with learning together strategy instruction. Table 2 shows the undergraduate EFL experimental group students' views on learning together strategy instruction. For easier clarification, the *strongly agree* and *agree* responses were combined into an *agree* response, and *strongly disagree* and *disagree* responses were combined into a *disagree* response. Table 2 shows that 80% of the EFL undergraduate experimental group students thought that learning together strategy instruction could inspire them to active learning. Group discussion was the major method adopted in learning together strategy instruction classes, and 85% of the EFL undergraduate experimental group students asserted that group discussion benefited their reading comprehension, while 75% of the EFL undergraduate experimental group students thought that group discussion helped them obtain better post reading comprehension test scores.

In total, 70% of the EFL undergraduate experimental group students confirmed that they have learnt, have improved and have good command of taught reading comprehension skills from their partners in the course of the learning together strategy instruction process. Exactly 60% of the EFL undergraduate experimental group students felt satisfied with their partners' performance for the duration of learning together strategy instructional activities. In spite of spending much time preparing and engaging in group discussions in the learning together strategy instruction process, 75% of the EFL undergraduate experimental group students preferred the learning together strategy instruction method to traditional lecture instruction method. In total, 55% of the EFL undergraduate experimental group students agreed that learning together strategy instruction fetched much pleasure to their reading comprehension study. In brief, most of the EFL undergraduate experimental group students approved that learning together strategy instruction encouraged them to active learning, and enhanced their English reading comprehension skills; yet, 65% of the EFL undergraduate experimental group students felt satisfied from interaction with their group members.

Table 2 EFL undergraduate experimental group students' views on learning together strategy instruction

Compared with traditional lecture instruction,		Agree	No difference	Disagree
1.Active learning	Learning together inspires me to more active learning.	80%	20%	
2.Group discussion	Group discussion helps me grasp more key ideas from the text.	85%	15%	
	Group discussion reminds me of neglected key points in the text.	95%	5%	
	Group discussion helps me have more comprehensive understanding of the text.	90%	10%	
	Group discussion helps me determine the parts I don't really understand.	90%	10%	
	Group discussion helps me improve my exam scores.	75%	25%	
3.Views of Learning together	Learning together helps me realize others' study methods that benefit me.	70%	25%	5%
	Learning together requires much more time to study.	75%	25%	
	Learning together brings more pleasure to study.	55%	45%	
	I prefer learning together.	75%	25%	
4.Interactions	Learning together increases my classroom participation.	55%	40%	5%
	Learning together helps me share and help others which confirm my abilities.	60%	40%	
	During learning together, I feel satisfied with the interactions with my partners.	65%	30%	5%

14. DISCUSSION

After learning together instruction, what are undergraduate EFL experimental group students' perceptions of the utility of Learning Together instruction in improving their reading comprehension achievement? The points of view of experimental group students expressed in the Learning Together Strategy Survey showed that in learning together reading comprehension classroom, besides listening to the lectures, they were offered, through working together, more opportunities to enthusiastically learn by previewing the reading comprehension text, interacting with other group members, and helping each other during group discussions. Consequently they gained better reading comprehension, which, in turn, helped them increase their self-confidence and achieve higher scores in the posttest than those obtained in the pretest. All through group discussions, students got partners' support, assistance and encouragement, which made them ready to dedicate much more time to study reading comprehension and enjoy working with each other through learning together activities more than just sitting passively and listening to lectures. Therefore, over 86% of the experimental group students asserted that the group discussion of learning together strategy instruction promoted their reading comprehension skills, enhanced their scores, and increased their self-confidence.

15. IMPLICATIONS & CONCLUSION

When selecting a suitable instructional strategy for EFL reading comprehension students, it is essential to take into account not only the students' linguistic needs but also the students' personal learning styles. According to Freeman and Freeman (2006), "a skill is a strategy that has become automatic" (pp. 133–134). Another significant account for choosing a proper EFL reading comprehension instructional strategy is that learning together strategy discussed above is a strategy that can benefit all EFL reading comprehension students, regardless of their language abilities, needs or the programs in which they are enrolled. Whether EFL reading comprehension instruction occurs in the beginners, intermediates or advanced EFL language reading comprehension classroom, all students can make many benefits from learning together strategy instruction. No matter the undergraduate EFL program, lecturers should do their best to make sure that their undergraduate EFL students do not ever encounter any negative experiences or attitudes that deter them from trying to succeed in EFL reading comprehension and achieve their full potential. It is worth mentioning that the experimental group students who were exposed to learning together instruction had significantly positive perceptions and attitudes towards the utility of learning together strategy in improving their reading comprehension achievement. This study results support the findings of other previous studies carried out through reading comprehension and cooperative learning (Bolukbas, Keskin, Polat, 2011; Ghaith, 2003; Ning, 2011; Suh, 2009; Tsai, 2004). Learning together instruction caused a significantly positive improvement in the EFL undergraduate students reading comprehension achievement. The results of this research are consistent with the findings of previous studies (Chen, 1998; Liao & Oescher, 2009; Manolas & Filho, 2011; Tsai, 2004).

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