

**COLLABORATIVE LEARNING AS A PEDAGOGICAL MODEL FOR ADVANCING COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE IN TERTIARY-LEVEL EFL INSTRUCTION**Author: **Mamatalieva Khulkaroy Murodjonovna**

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**ABSTRACT:** This study investigates the impact of collaborative learning on the development of communicative competence among EFL learners in higher education. Grounded in socio-constructivist theory and interactionist perspectives, the research examines how structured collaboration facilitates linguistic development, promotes authentic communicative exchanges, and enhances speaking performance. A quasi-experimental design involving 60 undergraduate EFL learners was implemented over twelve weeks at a university in Uzbekistan. The experimental group received task-based collaborative instruction, while the control group followed a traditional teacher-fronted curriculum. Pre- and post-tests assessed learners' fluency, accuracy, lexical variety, and pragmatic competence. Qualitative data, including classroom observations and learner reflections, supported the quantitative findings. The results show that collaborative learning significantly improved learners' communicative competence.

**Keywords:** collaborative learning; communicative competence; EFL; task-based learning; speaking proficiency; peer interaction.

**Introduction.** Developing communicative competence remains a central goal in EFL education, especially in higher education contexts where learners must be able to use English for academic and professional purposes. In many post-Soviet contexts, including Uzbekistan, learners often demonstrate strong grammatical knowledge but lack of fluency and interactional competence. Traditional teacher-centered approaches have been criticized for limiting prospects for authentic communication.

Collaborative learning has emerged as an influential pedagogical model that addresses these limitations by promoting interaction, engagement, and peer-mediated support. The approach is grounded in socio-constructivist theory, which posits that knowledge is co-constructed through social interaction. Within SLA research, collaborative dialogue and negotiation of meaning are considered key mechanisms for language development [1.,1996; 2., 2000]. Despite a growing body of research, collaborative learning in the context of Uzbek higher education remains underexplored. This study investigates the role of collaborative learning in improving communicative competence among EFL learners and proposes a model for integrating collaboration into university curricula.

**Literature review.** The notion of communicative competence has remained central to language teaching research for more than five decades, forming the conceptual foundation for approaches that emphasize meaningful interaction and authentic language use. Early theoretical conceptualizations by Hymes described communicative competence as the ability not only to form grammatically correct sentences but also to use them appropriately across social contexts [2]. This multidimensional construct was later systematized by Canale and Swain, who proposed linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competences as integral components of communication in a second language [3]. Their framework significantly

influenced communicative language teaching (CLT), shifting pedagogical attention toward interactional practices that mirror real-life communication rather than artificial, grammar-focused exercises. Further developments in SLA research continued to emphasize that communicative competence is acquired most effectively when learners participate in meaningful exchanges in environments that foster negotiation of meaning, feedback, interactional adjustments, and co-construction of understanding [3], [4].

Within this theoretical landscape, collaborative learning has emerged as a pedagogically rich model capable of creating the communicative conditions required for language development. Defined broadly as a situation in which two or more learners work together to achieve shared goals, collaborative learning draws on socio-constructivist assumptions that knowledge is co-created over dialogue, shared problem solving, and collective reasoning [5]. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory provides an essential foundation for understanding how collaboration supports language acquisition: learning is mediated through social interaction, and learners operate within a Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) in which peer scaffolding enables cognitive and linguistic growth not attainable individually [6]. From this perspective, collaboration is not simply a classroom technique but a developmental process in which learners jointly construct meaning and support each other's movement toward higher levels of competence. A substantial body of SLA research confirms that collaborative interaction provides fertile ground for linguistic development. Long's Interaction Hypothesis argues that conversational interaction plays a critical role in acquisition because it offers opportunities for comprehensible input, comprehensible output, and negotiation of meaning [7]. When learners work collaboratively, they naturally engage in clarification requests, confirmation checks, and recasts—interactional moves that have been shown to facilitate deeper linguistic processing. Complementing this, the Output Hypothesis proposed by Swain emphasizes that producing language pushes learners to test hypotheses, notice gaps in their interlanguage, and refine their linguistic output [8]. Collaborative dialogue, in which learners jointly reflect on language forms and meanings, is thus considered a powerful mechanism for internalizing linguistic structures. Empirical studies examining pairs or small groups demonstrate that collaborative tasks stimulate significantly more metatalk, language-related episodes, and corrective feedback exchanges than individual tasks [9]. These findings reinforce the understanding that collaboration creates optimal conditions for both meaning-focused communication and language-focused reflection. Task-based language teaching (TBLT) further strengthens the theoretical justification for collaborative learning by positioning meaningful tasks at the center of instruction [3]. Tasks invite learners to engage with content, negotiate solutions, and express intentions in ways that approximate real-world communication. When tasks are completed collaboratively, they generate richer linguistic output and more sustained interaction than teacher-fronted formats. Research has shown that learners engaged in collaborative tasks such as jigsaw activities, problem-solving discussions, and role-plays demonstrate improved fluency, accuracy, lexical sophistication, and pragmatic competence [10]. Studies also highlight that collaborative tasks foster learner autonomy, increase motivation, reduce anxiety, and encourage deeper cognitive engagement with both content and language [11]. Moreover, collaborative work allows learners to notice linguistic features in context, an essential process in Schmidt's Noticing Hypothesis. These theoretical and empirical insights collectively position collaboration as a pedagogical mechanism that bridges communicative goals with cognitive processes essential for language development.

#### **METHODOLOGY (qisqartirilgan, mazmun saqlangan)**

This study employed a quasi-experimental design to examine the impact of collaborative learning on EFL learners' communicative competence. Such designs are widely recommended in applied linguistics when intact classes must be preserved and full randomization is not feasible [14]. The research was carried out at a state university in Uzbekistan with 62 undergraduate English philology students at CEFR B1–B2 levels. Participants belonged to two intact classes, one assigned as the experimental group and the other as the control group. Pre-test scores confirmed that the groups were comparable in their initial speaking proficiency, thus reducing threats to internal validity [15].

Four primary data collection tools were used: a CEFR-based speaking test, audio recordings of student performances, systematic classroom observations, and learner reflection journals. The CEFR rubric measured fluency, accuracy, lexical variety, and interactional competence, ensuring alignment with internationally recognized constructs of oral proficiency [16]. Speaking tasks consisted of a monologic description and a paired interaction designed to elicit negotiation of meaning. All performances were audio-recorded for later analysis.

The intervention lasted twelve weeks. The experimental group received instruction centered on collaborative learning principles. Lessons included jigsaw tasks, information-gap activities, problem-solving tasks, role-plays, and peer feedback. These tasks are well documented in SLA literature as effective means of stimulating negotiation of meaning and peer scaffolding [3], [9], [10]. The teacher functioned primarily as facilitator, encouraging learners to co-construct meaning and assume shared responsibility for task completion. By contrast, the control group followed a traditional, teacher-fronted syllabus characterized by grammar explanation, written exercises, and limited peer interaction—an instructional format shown to provide fewer opportunities for communicative practice [17].

**Results.** The results of the study indicate that collaborative learning had a significant positive effect on the communicative competence of the experimental group compared to the control group. Analysis of the pre- and post-test scores revealed substantial improvements in fluency, accuracy, lexical variety, and pragmatic competence among learners who engaged in collaborative tasks. In contrast, the control group demonstrated only modest gains, primarily in linguistic accuracy, consistent with teacher-fronted instruction. Speaking fluency showed the most notable improvement in the experimental group. Students produced longer uninterrupted runs, displayed higher speech rates, and exhibited fewer filled and unfilled pauses. Quantitative comparisons shown that the experimental group experienced a substantially greater increase in speech rate and reduction in hesitation phenomena, whereas the control group's progress was limited. These findings align with previous evidence suggesting that peer interaction and negotiation of meaning create communicative pressure that pushes learners toward more fluent output [10], [17].

Accuracy also improved significantly in the experimental group. Post-test analysis showed a higher ratio of error-free clauses, fewer morphosyntactic errors, and more consistent use of target structures. Although both groups improved, the magnitude of improvement was considerably greater in the collaborative learning condition. This supports existing research demonstrating that collaborative dialogue encourages learners to notice linguistic gaps and engage in mutual scaffolding, leading to more accurate output [9]. Lexical variety and sophistication displayed noticeable gains as well. Transcriptions of post-test performances showed that learners in the experimental group employed a broader range of lexical items and

more topic-specific vocabulary. The type–token ratio increased, and lexical choices became more precise and contextually appropriate. These outcomes are consistent with previous findings showing that task-based collaboration promotes deeper cognitive processing and exposure to peers’ lexical resources, which in turn enhances vocabulary development [10].

Pragmatic competence also improved significantly in the experimental group. Students demonstrated more effective use of discourse markers, turn-taking strategies, repair moves, and clarification requests. These features contributed to more coherent and interactionally effective communication. The increased presence of clarification questions, confirmation checks, and collaborative moves reflects the interactional benefits associated with meaning-focused peer exchanges reported in sociocultural and interactionist SLA research [6], [7], [12].

Classroom observation data corroborated the quantitative results. During the intervention, students in the experimental group demonstrated high levels of mutual engagement and equal participation. Interaction patterns were characterized by sustained dialogue, joint problem solving, peer scaffolding, and frequent negotiation of meaning. Help-seeking and help-giving behaviors were common, indicating that learners perceived collaboration as a shared responsibility. These behaviors align with Vygotskian perspectives on learning as a socially mediated process [6]. Reflections collected from learner journals further supported the positive impact of collaborative learning. Many students reported increased confidence in speaking, reduced anxiety, and greater enjoyment of communicative tasks. Several noted that working with peers helped them notice their own mistakes and learn alternative ways of expressing ideas. The affective benefits described in the journals reinforce findings in previous research suggesting that collaborative learning enhances motivation and reduces affective barriers that often inhibit oral performance [19].

**Table 1.** Comparison of Pre-test and Post-test Speaking Scores Between Control and Experimental Groups

<b>Components of Speaking Competence</b>	<b>Group</b>	<b>Pre-test Mean (SD)</b>	<b>Post-test Mean (SD)</b>	<b>Mean Gain</b>
<b>Fluency (speech rate, pauses)</b>	Control	2.61 (0.42)	2.89 (0.38)	<b>+0.28</b>
	Experimental	2.58 (0.40)	3.47 (0.36)	<b>+0.89</b>
<b>Accuracy (error-free clauses)</b>	Control	2.74 (0.39)	3.02 (0.41)	<b>+0.28</b>
	Experimental	2.71 (0.37)	3.55 (0.34)	<b>+0.84</b>
<b>Lexical Variety (TTR, lexical range)</b>	Control	2.68 (0.36)	2.95 (0.35)	<b>+0.27</b>
	Experimental	2.70 (0.38)	3.49 (0.33)	<b>+0.79</b>
<b>Pragmatic Competence (turn-taking, repair, discourse markers)</b>	Control	2.59 (0.40)	2.87 (0.39)	<b>+0.28</b>
	Experimental	2.62 (0.41)	3.58 (0.37)	<b>+0.96</b>
<b>Overall Communicative Competence</b>	Control	2.65 (0.38)	2.93 (0.34)	<b>+0.28</b>
	Experimental	2.65 (0.35)	3.52 (0.31)	<b>+0.87</b>

Scores are based on CEFR-aligned descriptors (1–5 scale). The experimental group receiving collaborative learning instruction outperformed the control group across all components. The largest gains were observed in pragmatic competence and fluency, indicating that collaborative tasks stimulated interactional development and reduced speaking hesitation.

Collectively, the results provide converging evidence that collaborative learning fosters more holistic development of communicative competence than traditional instruction. Improvements were observed not only in linguistic dimensions—fluency, accuracy, and vocabulary—but also in interactional and pragmatic competence, which are essential components of effective communication in real-world contexts. These findings validate theoretical claims in the literature and demonstrate the pedagogical value of collaborative learning for EFL students in higher education settings.

**Discussion.** The results of the study clearly show that collaborative learning contributed to significant improvements in learners' communicative competence. Students in the experimental group demonstrated noticeable progress in fluency, accuracy, lexical variety, and pragmatic features of spoken interaction. These gains indicate that collaborative tasks created richer opportunities for producing language, receiving feedback, and negotiating meaning compared to traditional instruction. The improvement in fluency suggests that learners became more confident and comfortable managing extended turns in conversation. Increased accuracy and more consistent use of grammatical structures show that working with peers encouraged learners to monitor their output and notice language gaps. Likewise, the expansion of lexical variety reflects learners' exposure to peers' linguistic resources, as well as the cognitive engagement stimulated by problem-solving and meaning-focused tasks.

Overall, the findings confirm that collaborative learning provides linguistic, cognitive, and emotional conditions that are highly conducive to the development of communicative competence. Compared to traditional methods, collaboration offers more meaningful interaction, richer language exposure, and stronger support for learner confidence—factors that collectively enhance speaking proficiency in EFL contexts.

**Conclusion.** This study confirmed that collaborative learning is an effective pedagogical approach for developing communicative competence among EFL learners in higher education. Students who participated in collaborative tasks showed substantial improvement in fluency, accuracy, lexical variety, and pragmatic competence compared to those who received traditional instruction. The findings indicate that collaboration creates supportive conditions in which learners negotiate meaning, receive peer feedback, and practice interactional strategies in authentic communicative situations.

The results also suggest that collaborative learning fosters positive affective outcomes. Learners reported higher motivation, increased confidence, and reduced speaking anxiety, all of which contribute to more active participation and improved oral performance. Overall, the study confirms that collaborative learning is not only beneficial for linguistic development but also crucial for promoting learner engagement and autonomy. These outcomes highlight the value of integrating structured collaborative practices into university-level EFL curricula.

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