

Integrating Cooperative Learning in Reading Classrooms: An Investigation of Saudi EFL Learners' Perception

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Abstract

The Social Interdependence Theory offers pedagogical implications indicating that positive participation in the learning process results in higher academic and social progress. In light of this theory, this study explores Saudi EFL learners' perceptions of cooperative learning (CL) activities in English reading classrooms. A large body of research has investigated the application of CL in language classrooms, but it has mostly focused on how implementing CL affects learners' achievements and academic performance rather than their perceptions of CL. Therefore, this study investigates Saudi learners' perceptions of CL in reading classrooms. The study's participants were 64 low-level EFL learners taking a general English course as part of their preparatory year requirements. The study adopted a descriptive survey-based design. The participants were first given a language background questionnaire and the Oxford Quick Placement Test to determine their proficiency levels. Then, they were taught using a method of CL – Reciprocal Teaching – for six one-hour sessions. The learners were next given a survey questionnaire that consisted of 14 items concerning their perception

of CL activities in reading classrooms after all of the Reciprocal Teaching sessions had been completed. Overall, the findings reveal that the participants have positive views of CL in reading classrooms. Based on the findings, the study offers pedagogical implications for future classroom practices.

Keywords: Cooperative learning, Learners' perceptions, Reading comprehension

1. Introduction

Teaching methodology has been a controversial issue among language practitioners throughout the history of foreign language teaching (Cohen, Brody, & Sapon-Shevin, 2004; Farzaneh & Nejadansari, 2014). Typically, English language classrooms in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) have been characterized by a teacher-centred method across all levels of education. This applies to elementary, intermediate, and secondary levels of education, as well as university education (Alhaidari, 2006).

However, recent decades have witnessed a shift in education from a teacher-centred approach, in which the teacher is responsible for delivering knowledge while students passively receive it, to a student-centred approach, in which learners are expected to be more active and involved in the classroom (Almulla, 2017; Cavanagh, 2011). The teacher-centred approach transmits language knowledge from the teacher to learners, placing all responsibility on the teacher (Miller, McNear, & Metz, 2013). Cooperative learning (CL) is a way to make classrooms student-centred so that learners work together to learn new concepts and skills while the teacher takes on the role of a guide or a facilitator (Farzaneh & Nejadansari, 2014; Miller, McNear, & Metz, 2013). The responsibility in the classroom is shared between the teacher and learners; this is the core of CL.

Research has focused more on how CL impacts academic achievement and performance rather than how it is viewed by learners and affects their perception (Alhaidari, 2006; Al-Tamimi & Attamimi, 2014; Gonzales & Torres, 2016; Kezoui, 2014). Moreover, CL studies have been conducted in different contexts all over the world (Cavanagh, 2011; Farzaneh & Nejadansari, 2014; Gonzales & Torres, 2016; Miller, McNear, & Metz, 2013) with little emphasis on the Middle East and KSA in particular. In addition, previous studies have examined CL's use on different subjects and language skills, like writing, speaking and grammar, but rarely on reading (Al-Tamimi & Attamimi, 2014; Cavanagh, 2011; Kezoui, 2014). Therefore, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of CL by demonstrating how it is perceived by Saudi learners in reading classrooms. To reach deeper insights, the researchers gave the participants a chance to experience CL by teaching a number of sessions using Reciprocal Teaching (RT). Participants' perceptions were investigated through a survey questionnaire that answered the main research question: What are Saudi learners' perceptions of well-organised CL groups in the reading classroom?

This paper begins with a background of cooperative learning, Social Interdependence Theory, reading comprehension, and reciprocal teaching. Then, it presents a brief overview of previous studies in the field. Next, it provides details on the study. Finally, it discusses limitations and pedagogical implications.

2. Cooperative Learning: Definition and Elements

Students' engagement in the learning process can take several forms. Traditionally, individualistic and competitive manners are the most common ways of learning. Such manners can be seen in a teacher-centred classroom where all the teacher does all the talking and explanation and the learners are passive subjects (Almulla, 2017 and Cavanagh, 2011).

This type of instruction invites learners either to work individually or compete against each other to finish assigned tasks, leaving no room for interaction or cooperation (Alhaidari, 2006). This type of instruction is widely used in different contexts throughout the world (Farzaneh & Nejadansari, 2014; Hamm, 1992). In these classrooms, students can easily lose focus after 15 minutes of class time as a result of not being involved in the learning process and instead submissively receiving whatever the teacher delivers (Almulla, 2017). Moreover, it is expected that the learners not ask questions even when misunderstanding parts of the lesson because they have been silent almost the whole class time or have not been given the opportunity to ask questions. These classrooms usually lack consistent interaction between learners and, consequently, each student works alone and keeps all the knowledge to themselves with minimal engagement with the teacher or the classmates (Alhaidari, 2006; Almulla, 2017; Cavanagh, 2011). According to Johnson and Johnson (1988), this leads to "negative interdependence," in which negative feelings, anxiety, and apprehension are associated with classroom participation (Cavanagh, 2011; Gonzales & Torres, 2016; Johnson & Johnson, 1988).

On the other hand, CL classrooms are student-centred and encourage group interaction. The classroom is divided into groups of three or four and only when all members work together to share knowledge can the group achieve any given task. This is the core of CL that the current study investigates and is known as "positive interdependence" (Cavanagh, 2011; Gonzales & Torres, 2016; Johnson & Johnson, 1988). Gillies, Ashma, and Terwel (2011) define CL as an educational approach that gives learners varying degrees of competence to interact through organised groups to achieve academic and social success. CL can be implemented through a variety of strategies such as Jigsaw, RT, Think-Pair-Share, Group Investigation, and more. It is the teacher's responsibility to select the most appropriate CL method for the learners' needs (Cohen, Brody, & Sapon-Shevin, 2004; Heinrich, 2015). The current study focuses on RT, as it involves teaching comprehension that fosters strategies for low and high achievers. This paper will discuss CL details later.

CL does not simply divide students into groups. This grouping must achieve certain characteristics to foster cooperation among learners. The five basic elements of CL, as mentioned in a number of studies (Alhaidari, 2006; Almulla, 2017; Cohen, Brody, & Sapon-Shevin, 2004; Farzaneh & Nejadansari, 2014; Hamm, 1992; Ifeoma, Ngozi, & Nkem, 2015; Johnson & Johnson, 1988; Kezoui, 2014 among others) are as follows:

- 1- Positive interdependence: students can only succeed through helping each other solve problems and sharing the workload.
- 2- Face-to-face promotive interaction: members of the group explain parts of the lesson to each other, make connections to previously learned knowledge, and support each other when feeling discouraged. This promotes a high quality of learning.
- 3- Individual accountability: each member's performance and effort affects the whole group. Each member takes full responsibility for doing his or her assigned part to the best of his or her knowledge, willingly helping the low achievers in order to succeed collectively.

4- Social skills: each member must attain certain skills for the group to meet class standards. Among these are leadership, anger-management, problem-solving, and trust-building. These characteristics are best taught to the learners from an early age and must be emphasised when dealing with each course's subject matter. Learners may lack some of these skills if they are unfamiliar with CL from previous classes. The teacher can promote these skills by rotating classroom roles, monitoring performance, and assisting those in need.

5- Group processing: this element is similar to how self-evaluation and reflective feedback work. After each session, groups provide feedback on the other members' strengths and limitations. This promotes future improvement and maintains a successful level of production. Groups are encouraged to share their reflections in order to benefit the whole class. Each group submits written feedback after each session; these forms are compiled into a portfolio that records development.

The current study investigates learners' perception of CL, elicited through an intervention period. The participants were taught RT by applying CL in reading classrooms. Participants were grouped in accordance to the aforementioned criteria. The next section offers an overview of the paper's theoretical background.

3. Theoretical Background

According to Johnson and Johnson (1988), Social Interdependence Theory (SIT) is the core of CL, as it provides a solid framework from which the five elements of CL grouping derive. It emphasizes how an individual's performance can affect the rest of the group and that the organization of CL groups determines how the members collaborate with each other (Almulla, 2017; Gillies, Ashman & Terwel, 2011; Heinrich, 2015). Johnson and Johnson (1988) state that applying SIT helps learners participate positively, leading to better academic results and social progress.

Effective SIT application is achieved through positive interdependence. According to Johnson and Johnson (1988), SIT has three categories. The first is positive interdependence, which occurs when group organization results in a positive relationship among the members; cooperation is crucial, as the whole group aims for the same goal (this is what the current study seeks to achieve). The second category is negative interdependence, in which group organization results in a negative relationship among the members; here, competition dominates group dynamics, as each individual works alone to achieve the assigned task. The last category is "no interdependence," which occurs when group organization results in no relationship among the members; here, individualism leads to members working on tasks without any contribution from others.

RT is an example of a positive interdependence, since it involves positive interaction among group members to achieve a given task.

4. Previous studies on CL

A large body of literature has investigated CL in different contexts, recruiting different samples based on age, gender, and language proficiency. Most of these studies have examined

how CL impacts learners' performances rather than their perceptions. Alhaidari (2006) conducted a study of 57 Arabic male students attending fourth and fifth grade at a United States Saudi school (mean age = 11). He investigated how implementing CL activities affects reading performance, particularly vocabulary knowledge and fluency. The researcher used a quasi-experimental design and distributed pre- and post-tests to compare scores before and after the treatment. His tests examined different areas of performance, including vocabulary, fluency, and reading comprehension. The findings reveal that the experimental group outperformed the control group in vocabulary and fluency. Additionally, the researcher explored the participants' and teachers' attitudes towards CL through questionnaires. Alhaidari used these responses to better interpret the test scores. He found that the participants positively viewed CL, but there was no significance reading comprehension compared with vocabulary and fluency. This could be attributed to lack of explicit instruction in the treatment because of the study's short duration.

Almulla (2017) examined how teachers and male high school Saudi students perceived CL. The participants completed questionnaires, interviews, and classroom observations, while the teachers only participated through interviews after receiving a training course on CL. The results reveal positive attitudes from both students and teachers towards applying CL in the classroom. Moreover, the teachers indicated that the training course gave them a better understanding of the concept and how to successfully implement it in their teacher-centred classrooms. This has a useful implication for policy-makers and professional development units to provide more teacher-training programmes and opportunities to introduce teachers to new teaching approaches. Such professional development programmes can pave the way for teachers to try new methods in class, benefiting the learners.

Along the same lines, Farzaneh and Nejadansari (2014) examined 52 intermediate Iranian EFL learners while applying CL in reading classrooms. They taught participants for five weeks using Jigsaw, one method of CL. Afterwards, participants completed questionnaires. The quantitative data findings reveal positive views towards implementing CL in class.

Some studies outline the pros and cons of CL activities. Gonzales and Torres (2016) taught 68 Filipino ESL eighth graders using CL techniques in reading classrooms. They gave the participants pre- and post-tests to detect changes in reading performance. They also explored the students' attitudes towards CL through questionnaires. Although participants indicated a positive response to CL, interview answers showed some downsides. Some respondents stated that CL requires extra work compared to the teacher-centred method. Others indicated that it was hard to support other members of the group and finish tasks within the allocated time. Moreover, researchers found a weak positive relation between attitudes towards CL and reading comprehension scores. In addition, the reading performance test results differed significantly from those of the pre-test. Researchers related this lack of significance to the short period of intervention and recommended that future research allocate more time. They further highlighted that the tests used in their study may not give a good indication of the learners' reading performance while assessing higher cognitive skills like paraphrasing and predicting. This could be attributed to the nature of the tests, which consisted mainly of multiple-choice items. They advised that future research consider performance-based

assessments to better examine reading performance.

Thus far, this paper has addressed the concept of CL by providing definitions, elements, underlying theories, and categories. It will next provide details on reading comprehension studies.

5. Reading comprehension and RT

Reading is a complex cognitive construct defined as the process of receiving and interpreting information from a given text input to find meaning. It is an active process that requires an interaction between the reader and the text to reach to a better understanding (Hudson, 2007). Different teaching approaches and strategies can be used to enhance reading comprehension. Learners can tackle a reading text from a bottom-up approach, which looks at the smallest elements that form the text – letters, words, clauses, and sentences – to construct meaning. This is a micro approach that suits younger or elementary-aged students who tend to read word-for-word and translate verbatim (Hudson, 2007; Lawrence, 2007). Conversely, some learners can construct meaning of a given text through a top-down approach, which looks at the main idea to understand the big picture. This is a macro approach that is appropriate for more advanced readers who can summarize, evaluate, or analyse a text. According to Lawrence (2007), some cognitive mental skills that construct meaning can be employed in a top-down approach, such as problem-solving, note taking, and predicting.

The National Reading Panel (2000) reports that reading generally involves three essential aspects: a certain amount of vocabulary and prior knowledge related to the topic of a reading passage; comprehension, which is an active, dialogic interaction between the reader and the text that involves constructing meaning rather than passively participating; and strategic instruction from instructors, especially for second/foreign language learners who need help reading texts in another language. This emphasises the importance of explicit instruction in reading strategies that can be employed by learners to comprehend reading passages and skilfully interact in class. This study uses RT as its CL instruction strategy. This approach involves teaching four reading strategies using bottom-up and top-down approaches, which can be of interest to different students in class. The teacher introduces these strategies by modelling her or himself in a think-aloud technique.

Reading comprehension studies concede that using a single teaching strategy does not lead to a significant positive effect on learners' comprehension compared to using more than one strategy simultaneously (Grabe, 2012; Hudson, 2007; Lawrence, 2007; Palinscar & Brown, 1984; Sporer, Brunstein, & Kieschke, 2009 among others). This study uses RT, which combines bottom-up and top-down approaches for students with low language abilities, because the sample is comprised of foundation year low-level EFL learners with limited language use. This supports the study's goal, which is not to try as many CL methods as possible or facilitate reading comprehension classes, but rather to put participants in CL groups and later elicit their perceptions towards CL.

RT, as put by Palinscar and Brown (1984), is an instructional approach that involves teaching comprehension-fostering strategies through dialogue between the teacher and students. In reading classes, language learners need to learn and employ strategies to help them

comprehend reading passages. The teacher must follow certain steps to apply this approach in class. According to Palinscar and Brown (1984), first, the teacher must explicitly explain four different strategies that can enhance reading comprehension: generating questions, summarizing parts of the text, clarifying difficult words, and predicting what comes next in the passage. Then, the teacher should clearly demonstrate these strategies by modelling a think-aloud technique through dialogue between the reader and the text. This allows the learners to monitor their teacher's practices and imitate her. Or him Then, through CL grouping, the teacher should seat the students into groups of four to six according to the total number of students in class and assign a specific role for each member, enabling scaffolding to take place (Lange, Costley, & Han, 2016; Sporer, Brunstein, & Kieschke, 2009).

One of earliest studies supporting the use of RT in reading classrooms is by Sporer, Brunstein and Kieschke (2009), who have investigated the effects of three different instructional approaches on the reading comprehension of 210 intermediate German learners. The researchers had three intervention groups and one control group. One group was taught reading comprehension-fostering strategies through RT by Palinscar and Brown (1984) in small groups; the second group had the same instruction but in pairs. The last group received the same instruction but in small groups guided by the class instructor. All participants among the three experimental groups were taught four reading strategies: summarizing, predicting, generating questions, and clarifying difficult words. However, the distribution of participants varied. The first group was comprised of small groups but the second was in pairs; the last group was seated in small groups guided by the teacher. The participants were given a pre-test, a post-test, and a delayed post-test examining their use of reading comprehension strategies, namely prediction, generating questions, summarizing, and clarifying difficult parts of the text. The results reveal significantly higher scores from all the experimental groups compared to the control group; moreover, the group that was taught by RT outperformed the two other experimental groups. These findings are in line with the study by Farzaneh and Nejadansari (2014) (reported above).

In brief, this paper explores the Saudi EFL learners' perception on using CL in reading classrooms. This perception was elicited through applying RT as one CL method. The next section provides study details, including the participants, instrument, data collection procedure, and analysis.

6. Methodology

6.1 Participants

The study consisted of 64 female preparatory year low-level Saudi Arabic-speaking learners of English (mean age: 19). They take English classes at the English Language Institute (ELI) in King Abdulaziz University, Jeddah as part of the university's required courses. The English course is completed when the students finish four levels of general English, beginning with level 1 and ending with level 4. These levels are taught in a modular manner with a total of four modules a year and each module lasting for eight weeks. The classes are scheduled for approximately three hours every day. These classes are given by qualified native and non-native instructors. The sample is therefore purposive. Prior to the study, the main class

teachers were asked about their approach in teaching reading. They all reported that they relied on individualistic and competitive rather than cooperative and interactive teaching strategies. These participants are not used to CL, making them a suitable sample pool.

To ensure a homogeneous sample, the participants were given the Oxford Quick Placement Test. The majority of participants scored in the range of A1/ A2 levels, which is a low level of language proficiency. Four of 68 participants were found to be advanced and were excluded from the study to ensure having a homogeneous group. Then, the participants were given a language background questionnaire, which revealed that they were all Saudis who had not spent any long period of time abroad; they all listed Arabic as their first language and the only language they used fluently. This verified the similarity of the participants' levels.

6.2 Instrument

The current study used a quantitative survey-based design to investigate Saudi learners' perceptions towards using CL techniques in reading classrooms. The participants filled out an adapted and modified closed-ended questionnaire by Alhaidari (2006) that measured their perceptions towards CL; see Appendix (1). This instrument easily elicits answers from a large sample in a short time to get measurable data. The questionnaire consisted of 14 items in a 5-point Likert scale that ranged from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree". Researchers majoring in the field checked the validity of the questionnaire by testing clarity and suitability. Moreover, the questionnaire was piloted with 20 participants from the same level, the results of which showed a good internal consistency with a Cronbach alpha coefficient of .793; the questionnaire is therefore reliable and can give the same results when replicated with another comparative sample. Additionally, the questionnaire was translated into the participants' first language, Arabic, to ensure their full understanding of the items presented relative to their low proficiency level.

6.3 Intervention

The researcher inspected regulations and teaching norms at ELI, revealing that language instructors usually teach reading classes without CL grouping and techniques. Instructors usually start reading lessons by asking students to silently read the passage then answer the comprehension questions through individual participation. The researcher observed this in actual reading classrooms at ELI and asked relevant ELI instructors about their approaches to teaching reading. The researchers wanted a group of learners unfamiliar with CL based on their educational background, making ELI classrooms a choice that allowed participants to experience a new method of teaching reading.

The researchers applied RT in two classrooms for six one-hour sessions. Each lesson consisted of a reading passage from the course book. It also involved activities and related tasks that required student-interaction. Before each lesson, the learners were arranged to sit in groups of four. The researchers explained the lesson aided by visuals and prompts and informed the learners that they could only complete their tasks through cooperation. To start the lesson, the researchers first asked participants about their general knowledge of the topic, then opened to the lesson's page and read the title together. Then, their attention was pointed

to the number of paragraphs the text has and assigned each group a specific paragraph to be working on; read and answer related questions. Researchers distributed worksheets containing comprehension questions related to the text and a table that identified the different roles of the group members. Giving each group member a role provides them with a sense of responsibility and helps keep all members busy. Responsibilities include identifying difficult words, translating words, making the summary, writing words, reading the answers out loud, and keeping track of time. The group that finished first with correct answers was rewarded with treats as encouragement.

6.4 Data Collection Procedure

The participants were first given a project information sheet to inform them about the study's goals and why they were chosen. They then signed consent forms, a copy of which they kept. Then, they were given a language background questionnaire that asked them about their first language, language fluency, and the language they used with family and friends. Next, they were given the Oxford Quick Placement Test that indicated that they were between beginner to lower intermediate levels. After finishing this preliminary stage, researchers taught them reading lessons using RT for six hour-long sessions. They completed a survey questionnaire after the six sessions to examine their perception towards CL

6.5 Data Analysis

Quantitative data obtained from the questionnaire were analysed through SPSS. The questionnaire comprised of 14 items in a 5-point Likert scale that ranged from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree", as described in section (6.2) above. The responses were converted into scores and numerically coded to be easily calculated. Along with the descriptive results, inferential statistics were obtained through the Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test to compare the sample's mean ranks. This test compared the participants' responses on the 5-point Likert scale questionnaire with the number 3, which is neutral. This test lets the researcher examine the significance of each item's response.

6.6 Ethical Considerations

Before collecting data, the participants were given a project information sheet which articulated the study's goals, why the participants were chosen, that their participation was completely voluntary, and that their responses would mainly be used for research purposes. Consent forms were distributed, and only after obtaining them did the questionnaire and interview sessions take place. Moreover, each participant kept a copy of the consent form; researchers collected another copy. Confidentiality provided greater validity.

7. Findings

This section provides a quantitative analysis of the closed-ended questionnaire given to the participants after they experienced RT. The researchers categorized the questionnaire's 14 items to correspond to the CL five elements of CL categorized by Johnson and Johnson (1988). Each table below displays descriptive statistics showing the statement, number of times each response was chosen, percentage of participants who chose the answer, and the

mean and standard deviation each item's response. Additionally, the researchers ran inferential statistics through the Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test to compare the sample's mean ranks. This test compared the participants' responses on the 5-point Likert scale questionnaire with the number 3, which is neutral. This test allows researchers to examine the significance of the participants' responses to each item.

Table 1 presents the participants' views on CL in terms of "positive interdependence" as part of the 14-item questionnaire.

Table 1. Participants' perception on CL regarding "positive interdependence"

Note: SA= strongly agree/ A= agree/ N= neutral/ D= disagree/ SD= strongly disagree

	S. No.	Statement	Mean	Std D	Responses	Frequency	Percentage	Total	Sign
1	1	I like working together with other students in reading classes.	4.13	0.95	SA	32	50.0%	100	0.000*
				A	20	31.25%			
				N	9	14.0%			
				D	2	3.1%			
				SD	1	1.5%			
2	4	I like participating in the reading class's discussion.	3.80	1.09	SA	11	17.1%	100	0.000*
				A	33	51.5%			
				N	10	15.6%			
				D	6	9.3%			
				SD	4	6.2%			
3	14	I am willing to share my book with other students if they forget it at home.	4.67	0.69	SA	45	70.3%	100	0.000*
				A	12	18.7%			
				N	6	9.3%			
				D	0	0%			
				SD	1	1.5%			

Based on the results shown in Table 1, 80% of the participants expressed positive attitudes towards working with other students in a group. Moreover, around 70% agreed with sharing their books with other students as a way of helping and supporting each other. This high percentage indicates an overwhelming positive view towards CL. A Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test revealed statistically significant responses for "positive interdependence", $z = 11.015$, $p < .05$, with a large effect size ($d = 0.77$). The median score is ($MD = 4$). This means that the students favour implementing CL activities in class over individual participation.

Next, Table 2 summarizes the participants' views on CL in relation to "face-to-face promotive interaction".

Table 2. Participants' perception on CL regarding "face-to-face promotive interaction"

Note: SA= strongly agree/ A= agree/ N= neutral/ D= disagree/ SD= strongly disagree

	S.	Statement	Mean	Std D	Responses	Frequency	Percentage	Total	Sign
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	No.								
1	6	I help others stay on task when we are reading together.	4.31	0.75	SA	32	50.0%	100	.000*
					A	26	40.6%		
					N	5	7.8%		
					D	1	1.5%		
					SD	0	0%		
2	9	I like when other students participate in discussions about reading.	3.91	1.08	SA	25	39.0%	100	.000*
					A	24	37.5%		
					N	9	14.0%		
					D	2	3.1%		
					SD	4	6.25%		
3	11	Other students encourage me to express my ideas.	3.70	1.12	SA	20	31.2%	100	.000*
					A	26	40.6%		
					N	10	15.6%		
					D	6	9.3%		
					SD	2	3.1%		

Table 2 shows that more than 80% of the participants helped their classmates stay focused when they read together in groups. Furthermore, more than half of the sample found that classmates encouraged them to express their thoughts and ideas when working together. A Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test revealed statistically significant responses for “face-to-face promotive interaction”, $z = 9.261, p < .05$, with a medium effect size ($d = 0.66$). The median score is ($MD = 4$).

Table 3 below reveals participants’ attitudes towards CL in relation to “individual accountability”.

Table 3. Participants’ perceptions of CL regarding “individual accountability”

Note: SA= strongly agree/ A= agree/ N= neutral/ D= disagree/ SD= strongly disagree

	S. No.	Statement	Mean	Std D	Responses	Frequency	Percentage	Total	Sign
1	2	I do not like asking other students for help in reading classes.	2.61	1.39	SA	4	6.2%	100	.028*
					A	5	7.8%		
					N	8	12.5%		
					D	23	35.9%		
					SD	24	37.5%		
2	3	I would rather work alone in reading classes.	2.47	1.22	SA	2	3.1%	100	.001*
					A	2	3.1%		
					N	25	39.0%		
					D	27	42.1%		
					SD	8	12.5%		

As shown in the above table, around 70% of the participants disagreed with the statement that asks about refusing to ask others for help. This shows a willingness to ask others for help on difficult topics. Additionally, only 4% of participants preferred working alone rather than working in groups. A Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test revealed statistically significant responses for “individual accountability”, $z = 2.198, p < .05$, with a small effect size ($d = 0.34$). The median score is ($MD = 3$).

Table 4 below illustrates the participants’ perception of “social skills” as part of CL.

Table 4. Participants’ perception of CL regarding “social skills”

Note: SA= strongly agree/ A= agree/ N= neutral/ D= disagree/ SD= strongly disagree

	S. No.	Statement	Mean	Std D	Responses	Frequency	Percentage	Total	Sign
1	7	In reading classes, I like explaining things to other students.	3.80	1.07	SA	9	14.0%	100	.000*
				A	28	43.7%			
				N	19	29.6%			
				D	4	6.2%			
				SD	4	6.2%			
2	12	I feel more like asking questions when working in a small group.	3.77	1.07	SA	25	39.0%	100	.000*
				A	24	37.5%			
				N	9	14.0%			
				D	2	3.1%			
				SD	4	6.2%			
3	13	If I am absent, I like other students to tell me what I missed.	4.11	1.11	SA	20	31.2%	100	.000*
				A	26	40.6%			
				N	10	15.6%			
				D	6	9.3%			
				SD	2	3.1%			

Table 4 shows that half the participants like to explain difficult parts of the lesson to other students. In addition, more than 60% are open to asking questions of each other when working in small groups. This indicates that there are the benefits for group learnings during reading classrooms. Additionally, A Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test revealed statistically significant responses for “social skills”, $z = 9,304, p < .05$, with a medium effect size ($d = 0.62$). The median score is ($MD = 4$).

Table 5 displays the participants’ perceptions on CL in relation to “group processing”.

Table 5. Participants’ perception of CL regarding “group processing”

Note: SA= strongly agree/ A= agree/ N= neutral/ D= disagree/ SD= strongly disagree

	S. No.	Statement	Mean	Std D	Responses	Frequency	Percentage	Total	Sign
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1	5	Working with other students helps me stay on task.	3.88	1.09	SA	26	40.6%	100	.000*
					A	21	32.8%		
					N	11	17.1%		
					D	4	6.2%		
					SD	2	3.1%		
2	8	When I discuss what we read with other students, I understand it better.	4.17	0.92	SA	29	45.3%	100	.000*
					A	25	39.0%		
					N	7	10.9%		
					D	2	3.1%		
					SD	1	1.5%		
3	11	Discussing reading with other students helps me learn.	3.91	1.06	SA	24	37.5%	100	.000*
					A	23	35.9%		
					N	10	15.6%		
					D	5	7.8%		
					SD	2	3.1%		

Table 5 above reveals that more than 75% of participants understand better when they are working with other students in a group. This shows that most of the participants find CL beneficial in terms of “group processing”. A Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test revealed statistically significant responses for “group processing”, $z = 10,009$, $p < .05$, with a medium effect size ($d = 0.67$). The median score is ($MD = 4$) which means that the students favour implementing CL activities in class over individual participation.

Figure 1 below displays the total percentage of the participants’ responses on the 14-item questionnaire.

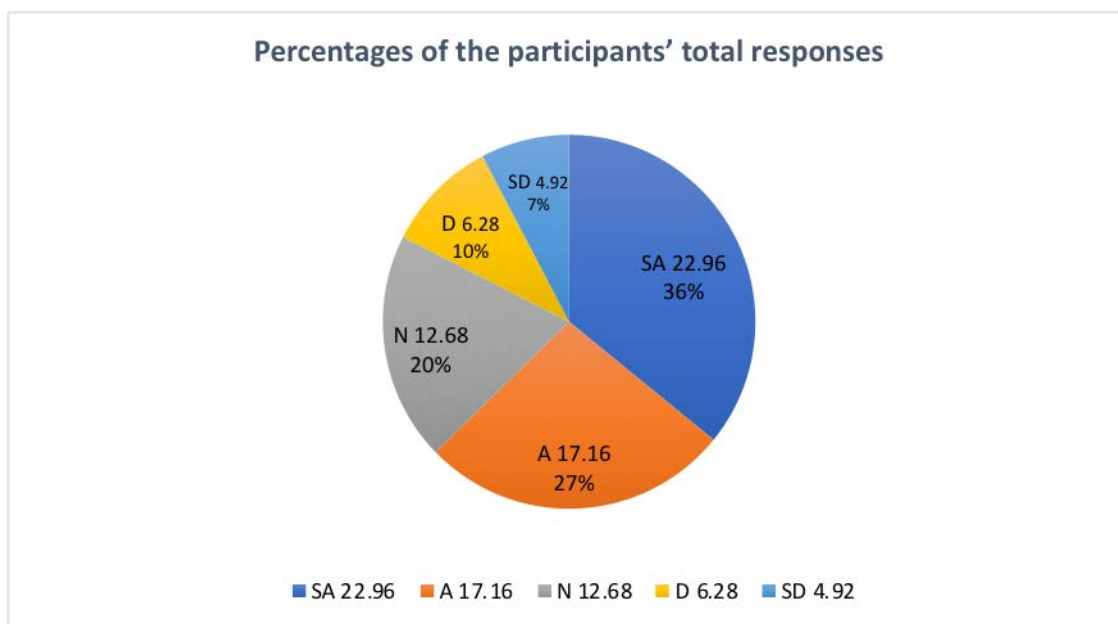


Figure 1. Percentages of the participants' total responses

Note: SA= strongly agree/ A= agree/ N= neutral/ D= disagree/ SD= strongly disagree

Based on the above pie-chart and in relation to the research question (What is Saudi learners' perception of well-organised CL groups in the reading classroom?), this study concludes that Saudi EFL learners had a positive response to implementing CL in the reading classroom. This is reflected in the descriptive results presented in the above chart, in which SA and A options received the highest percentages (36% and 27% respectively). Inferential statistics show that most participants agreed that CL groups enabled them to ask questions freely, explain difficult parts of the lesson to each other, and understand better when working in groups, showing a preference for CL in language classrooms.

8. Discussion

As indicated by the results, the participants had a positive perception towards using CL in reading classrooms. About 80% of participants stated that they preferred working in groups rather than individually. This result is supported by inferential statistics as revealed by the Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test. This outcome might be attributed to the reading class being active and beneficial for participants. The research findings are consistent with those by Alhaidari (2006), Farzaneh and Nejadansari (2014), and Gonzales and Torres (2016), among others, whose participants favoured CL groups over individual participation. These researchers stated that a possible reason for this preference is the high level of engagement. These activities encourage peer interaction, keeping the members active and attentive.

Around 90% reported successfully helping others stay focused during reading tasks when working together. Since participants were placed in groups and assigned roles at the beginning of the lesson, they needed to understand the task to help and support each other and be the first group to finish. Consequently, most participants expressed that they like helping each other stay focused either through reexplaining difficult parts of the given task or

offering to help in constructing answers with the responsible member. This shared sense of responsibility and support can indicate the participants' understanding and practicing the positive interdependence defined by Johnson and Johnson (1988) as part of SIT.

Participants were low-level learners, so shyness and fear of participation may be expected. However, when seated in small groups, more than 70% of participants expressed that working with others encouraged them to express their thoughts and ideas. This may be due to the small group sizes, which could increase learners' comfort and confidence to state their opinions freely without fear of being judged by the rest of the class. Members can always refine and inform each other's responses, which could encourage shy students to participate. There are similarities between the responses expressed by the participants of the current study and those in Cavanagh's (2011) study. The participants of the latter were also university students, but in a different context (Australia), and they were given CL activities in their regular mathematics lectures rather than language lessons. Interestingly, the participants indicated how working with other colleagues in small groups helped them understand the topic better, boosting their confidence and keeping them involved. This comfortable and assuring environment is a key concept in CL, as SIT by Johnson and Johnson (1988) suggests, which leads to mutual support, responsibility, and respect among group members.

Verifying this preference for group work, around 70% of participants disagreed with the idea of working alone and not asking other students for help in the reading class. This is attributed to an increased understanding of the lesson when working together during their reading classes. This result agrees with the study by Farzaneh and Nejadansari (2014), participants of which indicated that they preferred working with others over working individually; this method helps generate different ideas and allows students to depend on each other in solving problems, making learning an easier and more enjoyable task. However, this outcome contradicts that of Miller, McNear, and Metz (2013): a few of their participants favoured the teacher-centred classroom with minimal student-engagement over time-consuming CL activities.

Another noteworthy result of this study is that 85% of participants stated that discussing what they already learned in class with other students helped them to understand it better, leading to higher achievement. This finding corroborates findings by Almulla (2017), which shows that CL can grant learners more knowledge retention and a better understanding. This is due to the nature of CL, which requires learners to explain, elaborate, and retell what has been taught to other students, unlike that of teacher-centred classroom practices. This is attributed to the oral and mental rehearsal that is activated when learners are asked to discuss the content learned through CL implementation in contrast to the passiveness in teacher-centred classrooms.

9. Conclusion

This study was inspired by the shift from teacher-centred to student-centred approaches. The study explored Saudi EFL learners' perception of CL implementation in reading classrooms. The findings reveal positive views and a strong tendency towards applying the five CL elements (positive interdependence, face-to-face promotive interaction, individual

accountability, social skills, and group processing) in reading classes. These findings can inform language practitioners and curriculum designers about the benefits of CL activities and shows that they should be employed more frequently in reading classrooms. Consequently, language textbooks may integrate special CL activities that encourage group work

As indicated earlier, this study only applied the RT method of CL in reading classrooms due to time constraints. To develop a full picture of CL, future studies might apply different types of CL methods, such as Jigsaw or Think-Pair-Share, to reach a conclusive result. Additionally, CL can be explored in relation to other language skills, like speaking or writing. Finally, future studies might compare performance and perception of CL among learners of different language proficiency levels.

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Appendix 1

A Questionnaire on Learners' Perception toward Cooperative Learning in Reading Classrooms

Instruction: Please read each statement and check the response that best represents your feelings and opinion:

Strongly	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
SA	A	N	D	SD
1- I like working together with other students in reading classes.				
SA	A	N	D	SD
2- I do not like asking other students for help in reading classes.				
SA	A	N	D	SD
3- I would rather work alone in reading classes.				
SA	A	N	D	SD
4- I like participating in the reading class's discussion.				
SA	A	N	D	SD
5- Working with other students helps me stay on task.				
SA	A	N	D	SD
6- I help others stay on task when we are reading together.				
SA	A	N	D	SD
7- In reading classes, I like explaining things to other students.				
SA	A	N	D	SD
8- When I discuss what we read with other students, I understand it better.				
SA	A	N	D	SD
9- I like when other students participate in discussions about reading.				
SA	A	N	D	SD
10- Discussing reading with other students helps me learn.				
SA	A	N	D	SD
11- Other students encourage me to express my ideas.				

SA A N D SD

12- I feel more like asking questions when working in a small group.

SA A N D SD

13- If I have been absent, I like other students to tell me what I missed.

SA A N D SD

14- I am willing to share my book with other students if they forget their book at home.

SA A N D SD

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