



Iranian TEFL Students' Perceptions and Challenges in Collaborative Content Learning Across Gender

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Abstract

Collaborative content learning (CCL), as a process of learning that contributes to effective learning of the content of the courses in EFL contexts, has recently gained prominence in the research literature; however, the male and female students' perceptions regarding CCL's efficacy and their challenges in experiencing it are open questions. Thus, this mixed methods research investigated the contribution of CCL to Iranian TEFL students' learning of the content. It focused on their perceptions and challenges across gender. Sixty male and female participants in the master's program participated in the study. To collect the data, a questionnaire and interviews were used. The findings of the study, using quantitative data analysis, showed that more than half of the learners believed that CCL is effective in EFL teaching and learning context, especially, in terms of negotiation and problem-solving. Moreover, the results showed no statistically significant difference between male and female students' perceptions of the efficacy of CCL. Finally, the analysis of the interviews' data qualitatively revealed that male learners had methodological challenges in CCL, while female learners had communication challenges. The findings of the study suggest the beneficial role of CCL in raising students' awareness of skillful collaboration for maximum learning of the content.

Keywords: challenges, collaborative content learning, gender, perceptions

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Introduction

Nowadays students prefer to take liability for their learning and prefer group learning (Alfares, 2017). Collaborative learning (CL) is an educational viewpoint in which group work helps learners to construct a joint outcome. In the classroom context, CL can enable, stimulate, and support learning. It facilitates productive interaction and learning (Schnaubert & Bodemer, 2019). The rationale for considering the role of the CL environment in the EFL context of Iran is to investigate whether this environment can enhance students' content learning. CCL is a conceptual approach to learning, that integrates the foreign language learning process with the content subject, and roots in psychological, social, and sociocultural theories. According to Cantwell and Andrew (2002), students prefer collaborative work on the content since it enhances their learning. Martin et al. (2019) discuss the application of CL at the university level which assists the learning process.

Some studies have considered the usefulness of CCL (Chen et al., 2021; Sousa et al., 2019). Chen et al. (2021) assume that students' CL at the group level may encourage learners to learn content easier. While students interact with each other they manage consultations in a friendly setting and have high levels of mutual reliance. The outcome is independency and joint information (Sousa et al., 2019). To investigate the effect of gender on group work procures, the whole presentation of the curriculum should be brought into consideration (Tinkling, 2003). A detailed resolution shows the gender-specific variations in perceptions and educational progression (Murphy & Elwood, 1988). Some studies support genders' different perceptions of the effectiveness of CLL and their different challenges when working collaboratively (Wu & Wang, 2020). There have been some studies contributing to the operational role of CCL in enhancing language learning, but to the best knowledge of the researchers, learners' perceptions of the efficacy of CCL have not gained enough attention. In addition, to have a complete perspective on the contribution of CCL, the researchers focused on gender differences regarding their perceptions of the efficacy of CCL and also explored male and female learners' challenges in CCL. Therefore, this study was an attempt to investigate Iranian TEFL students' perceptions and challenges in CCL across gender.

Literature Review

CL is defined as a process in which learners get information from other learners through collaborative activities to have joint outcomes. Its origin comes from Vygotsky's (1962) social development theory and zone of proximal development (ZPD), both emphasizing the role of interactions and social activities. In this regard, as an example, Bruffee's (1972) method, Classroom Consensus Group, was offered in that the students were put into groups by the teacher and answered the questions to find answers altogether. CL is central to crucial thinking abilities. It implies that through collaborative activities, spoken interactions, self-organization, and management abilities can be fostered (Buzhardt et al., 2007). According to Kagan (1989), CL and putting learners in groups to detect and master the content of the courses were influential improvements in the academic context. Slavin (1991) believes that learning the content of the courses through collaboration

may lead to better achievements and increases social interactions in the classroom context. It leads to positive attitudes toward learning.

CL helps students to build collaborative skills in learning. Collaborative education aids learners to overcome the obstacles to learning encountered while working independently (Buzhardt et al., 2007). It aids various learners and increases content comprehension. Students support one another by asking questions, sharing ideas, and discussing them thoroughly (Torgesen et al., 2017). Through collaboration, learners can have higher degrees of reciprocal actions and higher levels of association. So, professionals can observe and change the learning and teaching workouts planned and performed to elevate interactions between the student (Ruta et al., 2013). As Mayne and Wu (2011) state, social communication techniques have a positive influence on students' communication skills.

Performing activities collaboratively in the classroom contribute to students' problem-solving and management proficiencies (Colbeck et al., 2000). Schnaubert and Bodemer (2019) believe that CL stimulates productive communication in the learning process. In addition, the motive to learn specific content can be boosted via CCL as students work together to solve problems of learning (Järvelä et al., 2010). CCL encourages learners to become more perceptive about particular plans for mastering the content (Stevens & Slavin, 1995). Working together on a piece of content, by participating in the learning process in a metacognitive, motivational, and behavioral way, develops the ability to self-adjust the learning. (Zimmerman, 2008).

Moreover, learners' perceptions of the efficacy of CCL can influence its effectiveness. Teachers need to consider students' ideas regarding their experiences with CCL (Gillies & Boyle, 2010). According to Chiriac and Granström (2012), students confirm the effectiveness of CL on academic performance because of social interactions that increase the quality of learning.

In a study, Chen (2005) inspected the efficacy of a collaborative education model on the reading comprehension of students. He concluded that teaching comprehension strategies help subjects understand ideas and improve their ability to find answers to questions. Jalilifar (2010) compared the differences between traditional English learning and student teams in a CL domain and realized that learner groups attained notable improvements on tests. Cokparlamis (2010) examined the impact of collaboration on the academic tasks of EFL classroom students. The results showed that CL created a more student-centered classroom environment.

As for CCL, a meta-analysis led by Lou et al. (1996) observed that CL had a remarkably positive role in content production. Bernard et al. (2009) found a connection between academic performance and interaction in distance learning. Torgesen (2017) had research on intermediate-level content learning classes. The teacher put students in groups that required collaboration. The results showed that students achieved better results.

According to Hartley and Sutton (2013), boys believe that girls are better at motivation and performance in collaborative work. Tannen (1991) states that along with the distinction between task and socio-emotional support, male learners prefer wise statements, lengthy postings, and self-advancement, whereas female learners show a tendency toward support and incapacitation. Ro and Choi (2011) argued that female learners need confirmation and they have negative perceptions about CL.

Therefore, gender differences are among learner variables influencing the process of education in language learning, particularly in collaborative tasks. However, the results are mixed in different studies. For example, the results of the study by Hargittai and Shafer (2006) showed no significant gender differences in challenges in CCL.

The research literature also illuminates different aspects of CL. Montazeri and Salimi (2019) investigated the effect of learners' tendency for CL. They revealed that interactions affect learning the subjects. Ebadi and Ebadijalal's (2020) study showed the participants' willingness to interact in the FFL context. Jamalvandi et al. (2020) showed that the teachers' role is influential in the students' willingness for CL and some students had conflicts in CL. However, there have been few studies, if any, on postgraduate TEFL students' perceptions and challenges across gender.

To meet the objectives of the study, this research aimed to answer the following research questions to fill the gaps in the research literature:

1. To what extent do TEFL students perceive the efficacy of CCL?
2. What are TEFL students' perceptions of the efficacy of CCL?
3. Is there a significant difference between male and female TEFL students' perceptions of the efficacy of CCL?
4. What are the challenges male and female TEFL students experience in CCL?

Method

Design

This descriptive and mixed methods study was conducted among TEFL students at the MA level. It was conducted at Islamic Azad University, Tabriz Branch during two semesters of the 1399-1400 academic years. Before conducting the study, the instructors got permission from the participants. They ensured the participants about keeping anonymous. The variables of the study were perceptions of the participants, their challenges, and their gender. In order to test the validity of the questionnaire a pilot study was used. In addition, Cronbach's Alpha was used to test the internal reliability of the questionnaire. Moreover, in order to test the construct validity of the questionnaire, the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) was used. Also, the interview questions were prepared and finalized based on expert views.

Qualitative data analysis (i.e., thematic analysis) was used for questions 2 and 4 which were about the perceptions of learners and challenges of the male and female students in CCL. Descriptive statistics were used to answer the first research question, and for the research question, 3 independent samples t-test was used. The data was analyzed by SPSS software version 26.

Participants

This study was conducted with the participation of 30 male and 30 female students. The participants were selected through convenience sampling. The participants' age range was 23-35 and they were at the MA level. They majored in TEFL at Islamic Azad University, Tabriz Branch. The professor of all of the participants was the same and applied the same method of teaching in all the classes involved in the study. They had the experience of CCL for two semesters

during their MA program for three courses (a) Principles of Teaching Foreign Languages, (b) Teaching of English Language Skills, and (c) Measurement, Assessment, and Evaluation of language. The participants were native speakers of the Azari and Persian languages.

Instruments

To measure the participants' perceptions of the efficacy of the CCL, a questionnaire was used, and to explore the participants' challenges in using CCL a focus group interview was conducted, in which MAXQ software was used for its data analysis. Their detailed descriptions are as follows.

Questionnaire

A questionnaire that had both close-ended and open-ended questions was used to check students' perceptions of the efficacy of CCL and answer the first three research questions (Appendix A). This questionnaire is based on the study carried out by the Centre for the Study of Learning and Performance, Concordia University (2020), which was modified by the researchers to be compatible with the context of the study. For each of the statements in the close-ended part, students had to check the answer. The response scale included a) Strongly Disagree (1) b) Disagree (2) c) Undecided (3) d) Agree (4) e) Strongly Agree (5). The questionnaire originally had 57 items. Based on the expert view, which was used for content validity, the researchers modified the questionnaire and reduced the items to 24. In items 1, 2, 5, 16, 23, and 40 the word content was added. In items 11, 12, 20, 30, 31, and 47, CCL was added. Items 10 and 22 were added to the questionnaire. Thus, 33 items were omitted, 13 items were modified, and 2 items were added by the researchers. In addition, at the end of the questionnaire, there were three open-ended questions about the perceptions of TEFL learners of the efficacy of CCL. These three questions were based on three factors (a) Enhancement of learning (first question); (b) Learners' helping each other (second question), and (c) Their preference for CL (third question). Before conducting the main study, the researchers validated the modified questionnaire through a pilot study (N = 15). From the same context, 15 students were selected based on convenience sampling by the researcher and participated in the pilot study. The researcher put the questionnaire in the participants' group on WhatsApp and they had three days to fill it out and send it back to the private chat of the researcher. In order to test the internal reliability of the questionnaire, the researchers used Cronbach Alpha, the result of which was .81, which is an acceptable level of reliability. The construct validity of the questionnaire was tested through the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO). The data showed that KMO was .92. The Bartlett test was also employed and the results revealed that the Bartlett test was at a significant level ($\text{sig} < 0.05$) for the research variables.

Focus Group Interview

A structured focus group interview with five questions was prepared and finalized based on expert views. It was used to explore the challenges of students in

CCL (fourth research question) These questions were based on four factors including, a) Challenges in disciplinary issues (first question); b) Challenges in collaboration with classmates (second question); c) Challenges in content learning (third question); d) Challenges in decision-making (fourth question). The fifth question sought suggestions from participants to overcome the challenges they faced in the process of CCL. The focus group interview was conducted with 18 students in three groups of six members. Each focus group interview lasted for 50 minutes. The interviewer was one of the researchers of the present study.

MAXQDA Software

MAXQDA is software for qualitative and mixed methods data analysis. It enabled the researchers to conduct research using codes and many methods of analysis, such as those used in Grounded Theory and thematic analysis. It can be utilized for coding and analyzing the data, interpreting the results of the study for analysis, and creating many different data visualizations. This software in the present study was used to answer the second and fourth research questions.

Procedures

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, administering both the questionnaire and the interview was done through the WhatsApp application. The researcher created a group in WhatsApp and after creating the questionnaire in Google Docs, making it available to the participants by providing the URL to them. The interview was also conducted through WhatsApp. They were asked to send both the questionnaire and the responses within three days. Before using the instruments, they were piloted with the pilot group (N = 15) from the same context.

By sending her voice to the group, the researcher explained the purpose of the study to the participants. They have been taught the courses 1) Principles of Teaching Foreign Languages, 2) Teaching of English Language Skills, and 3) Measurement, Assessment, and Evaluation of language through CCL by one of the researchers, as the instructor of these courses. The participants were justified about the aims of the research and they were assured about the confidentiality of their responses to the questions.

During the first sessions, before implementing the CCL, the instructor made the students familiar with the underlying assumptions of CCL, based on Smith and MacGregor (1992). She encouraged the participants to become active learners, think critically, and develop social skills to cooperate with classmates and develop independence. As a facilitator, she monitored the performance of the groups and controlled the quality of the content. She also helped the learners to be skillful in cooperation with each other by giving feedback to them. She has announced how she will assess their performance while supporting their efforts. To motivate students for the utmost effort for CCL, she mentioned that the assessment would be based on group performance, as well as individual performance within the group. She emphasized the role of organization and planning of the group work and the role of positive feedback.

Participants established groups of 3-5 members, alphabetically, but they were free to change their groups. Even though they were classmates, some of the students did not know each other well before creating groups, but little by little they started getting to know each other. The main collaborative activities included forming study teams for preparing and presenting PowerPoint presentations of the lessons, doing research and projects, and preparing for the final exams. Their main focus was content mastery of the courses. There was a head in each group selected voluntarily to handle duties. The head put different responsibilities, such as summarizing, finding supplementary materials, and designing PowerPoint presentations for group members according to their consultation, decision, and personal abilities. The assigned responsibilities were not fixed. If there was a problem for one of the group members, the others tried to cover their duties to stop group failure, and the duties were circulated among the group members once a month. They were in sustained contact with each other and discussed course content issues, related projects, and the quality of their group work. These activities lasted for two semesters for gathering the required data.

Results

Results of the Questionnaire

The first research question quantitatively investigated to what extent Iranian TEFL students perceived the efficacy of CCL. To check the normality of the data collected from the questionnaire about learners' perceptions of CCL, the Shapiro-Wilk test was used. Table 1 shows the results of running these normality tests on the collected data.

Table 1

Shapiro-Wilk Test for the participants' Perceptions

	Options	Shapiro-Wilk		
		statistic	df	Sig.
Perceptions of CCL	Disagreement	.914	30	.219
	Agreement	.950	30	.165

As Table 1 shows, the significant value of the participants' perceptions of CCL scores (.219 & .165) was higher than the alpha level of .05. Because the value of the Shapiro-Wilk Test was greater than 0.05, the data was normal. If it was below 0.05, the data significantly deviated from a normal distribution. So, the participants' perceptions of CCL scores had a normal distribution.

Construct Validity & Reliability

The collected data from the 24 items of the perceptions of the efficacy of the CCL questionnaire was entered into the SPSS software to run the exploratory factor analysis (EFA) to establish the validity of the questionnaire. Table 2 shows the results of KMO and Bartlett's Test.

Table 2

KMO and Bartlett's Test

	KMO	Bartlett	Sig.
		Chi-Square	
Perceptions of the Efficacy of the CCL	.925	3398.646	0.000

As Table 2 shows, the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) was used to measure the sampling adequacy. The data showed that KMO was .92, which was higher than the proposed minimum value of .6 (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). It was sufficiently large to perform EFA. In addition, the Bartlett test was employed to confirm the relevance of the data. The correlation matrix adopted in the analysis was not zero in the population. The results revealed that the Bartlett test was at a significant level (sig<0.05) for the research variables. It showed the satisfaction of the correlations. Table 3 illustrates the total variance of the data.

Table 3

Total Variance Explained

Component 1	Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
	18.241	76.004	76.004

According to Table 3, the results of the parallel analysis for the questionnaire showed only one factor with eigenvalues exceeded the corresponding criterion values for a data matrix of the same size. The one-factor solution explained a total of 76% of the variance of digitalization. The factor's rotating matrix is shown in Table 4.

Table 4

Rotated Component Matrix

Perceptions of the Efficacy of the CCL	Component 1
Q1	.766
Q2	.682
Q3	.703
Q4	.805
Q5	.735
Q6	.776
Q7	.727
Q8	.805
Q9	.823
Q10	.782
Q11	.786
Q12	.804
Q13	.822
Q14	.864
Q15	.823
Q16	.723
Q17	.743
Q18	.643
Q19	.667
Q20	.707
Q21	.613
Q22	.755
Q23	.733
Q24	.760

Each variable in this matrix has a factor load (factor score) greater than 0.5 and is classified under the umbrella of the desired factor. The contribution of the relevant factor to the overall variance of the target variable is greater when the coefficient's value is larger. As Table 5 illustrates, all of the questions belonged to one factor.

The results of Cronbach's alpha are shown in Table 5 to examine the overall internal consistency of the scale.

Table 5

Results of Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient

	Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Perceptions of the Efficacy of the CCL	24	.924

To answer the first research question, descriptive frequencies and percentages, and the mean of the responses, were used to compute the items of the questionnaire (Table 6).

Table 6

Descriptive Statistics Regarding Participants' Perceptions

Learners' Perceptions of CCL								
	SD	D	Total	Un	A	SA	Total	M(SD)
Item	Numbers	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)	
Item1	7 (11.7)	9(15.0)	16(26.7)	11(18.3)	14(23.3)	19(31.7)	33(55.0)	3.27(1.30)
Item2	6(10.0)	11(18.3)	17(28.3)	12(20.0)	16(26.7)	15(25.0)	31(51.7)	3.10(1.27)
Item3	6(10.0)	12(20.0)	18(30.0)	11(18.3)	14(23.3)	17(28.3)	31(51.6)	3.25(1.30)
Item4	5(8.3)	11(18.3)	16(26.6)	12(20.0)	16(26.7)	16(26.7)	32(53.4)	3.27(1.22)
Item5	7(11.7)	11(18.3)	18(20.0)	11(18.3)	19(31.7)	12(20.0)	31(51.7)	2.97(1.13)
Item6	5(8.3)	10(16.7)	15(25.0)	14(23.3)	15(25.0)	16(26.7)	31 (51.7)	3.18(1.21)
Item7	5(8.3)	10(16.7)	15(25.0)	13(21.7)	15(25.0)	17(28.3)	32 (53.3)	3.13(1.21)
Item8	8(13.3)	11(18.3)	19(31.6)	8(13.3)	16(26.7)	17(28.3)	33(55.0)	3.53(1.31)
Item9	8(13.3)	13(21.7)	21(35.0)	8(13.3)	15(25.0)	16(26.7)	31(51.7)	2.97(1.25)
Item10	5(8.3)	8(13.3)	13(21.6)	8(13.3)	16(26.7)	23(38.3)	39(65.0)	2.97(1.13)
Item11	4(6.7)	9(15.0)	13(21.7)	15(25.0)	15(25.0)	17(28.3)	32(53.3)	2.95(1.24)
Item12	6(10.0)	9(15.0)	15(25.0)	8(13.3)	22(36.7)	15(25.0)	37(61.7)	2.97(1.16)
Item13	9(15.0)	11(18.3)	20(33.3)	14(23.3)	11(18.3)	15(25.0)	26(43.3)	3.20(1.40)
Item14	5(8.3)	12(20.0)	17(28.3)	13(21.7)	14(23.3)	16(26.7)	30(50.0)	3.23(1.27)
Item15	8(13.3)	9(15.0)	17(28.3)	10(16.7)	15(25.0)	18(30.0)	33(55.0)	3.12(1.25)
Item16	3(5.0)	11(18.3)	14(23.3)	18(30.0)	15(25.0)	13(21.7)	28(46.7)	3.30(1.15)
Item17	7(11.7)	6(10.0)	13(21.7)	10(16.7)	23(38.3)	14(23.3)	37(61.6)	2.97(1.22)
Item18	5(8.3)	12(20.0)	17(28.3)	12(20.0)	15(25.0)	16(26.7)	31(51.6)	3.33(1.28)
Item19	12(20.0)	11(18.3)	23(38.3)	12(20.0)	13(21.7)	12(20.0)	25(41.7)	2.98(1.12)
Item20	6(10.0)	9(15.0)	15(25.0)	12(20.0)	16(26.7)	17(28.3)	33(55.0)	3.03(1.15)
Item21	7(11.7)	6(10.0)	13(21.7)	15(25.0)	17(28.3)	15(25.0)	32(53.3)	3.50(1.20)
Item22	4(6.7)	9(15.0)	13(21.7)	13(21.7)	13(21.7)	21(35.0)	34(56.7)	3.23(1.21)
Item23	8(13.3)	7(11.7)	15(25.0)	13(21.7)	17(28.3)	15(25.0)	33(53.3)	3.33(1.13)
Item24	8(13.3)	8(13.3)	16(26.6)	16(26.7)	12(20.0)	16(26.7)	28(46.7)	3.30(1.14)
Total 3.17(1.22)								

Note: SD= Strongly Disagree, D= Disagree, UN= Undecided, A= Agree, SA= Strongly Agree

As shown in Table 6, the highest percentage of the efficacy of CCL was related to item 10 (38.3%), stating that they can solve the problems related to the content of the courses by negotiating with group members, followed by item 22 (35.0%), saying that working in the group on the content help them to focus on the task more effectively, item 1 (31.7%), showing satisfaction on better-quality work. And item 15 (30.0%), focuses on getting better grades in CCL. It showed participants' degree of positive perceptions of the efficacy of CCL. The highest rate of solving problems in group work indicates this facilitative function of CCL in learning more than other functions.

To compare the mean frequency of disagreement and agreement about perceptions of the efficacy of CCL used by participants was of significant difference or not, the researchers employed Descriptive Statistics (Table 7).

Table 7

The Means and Standard Deviation of the Disagreement and Agreement

	Options	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Perceptions of CCL	Disagreement	30	16.03	2.62
	Agreement	30	32.13	3.57

As is illustrated in Table 7, the mean score and standard deviation of the participants' disagreement regarding their perceptions of the efficacy of CCL were (M = 16.03, SD = 2.61) and the mean score and standard deviation of the learners' agreement with the perceptions of the CCL were (M = 32.13, SD = 3.57), respectively. The higher mean showed the participants' agreement on the efficacy of CCL. Thus, the higher rate of agreement shows the overall positive perceptions of the participants.

To see whether the differences were significant or not, the Independent Samples T-test was run (Table 8).

As indicated in Table 8, the p-value for Levene's Test for Equal variances was .284, implying that the equal variances were assumed equal and the statistics in the first row should be used. It was found that the $t(58) = -19.918$, $p = .000 < .05$, revealed a statistically significant difference between participants' agreement and disagreement of perceptions of the efficacy of CCL.

Table 8

Independent Samples T-Test for participants' Agreement and Disagreement

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Perceptions of CCL	Equal variances assumed	1.168	.284	-19.918	58	.000	-16.10	.81	-17.72	-14.48
	Equal variances not assumed			-19.918	53.213	.000	-16.10	.81	-17.72	-14.48

The second research question qualitatively sought TEFL students' perceptions of the efficacy of CCL. The data obtained from the open-ended part of the questionnaire were analyzed using thematic analysis. Based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis, an iterative and reflective data analysis process was conducted.

1. Familiarize selves with the data. Responses to the open-ended part of the questionnaire were read carefully.

2. Generating initial codes. The obtained texts were analyzed and labeled (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to find statements that are units of meaning. The following are some sample answers to those three questions:

A) Why do you think that collaborative work enhances or does not enhance content learning?

"It enhances learning". "Human is a social creature". "It is enjoyable". "It enhances learning a lot". "It depends on learners' motivation". "Learners share their ideas about important points". "I think collaborative work enhances content learning because students can share their background knowledge".

B) Why do you believe that while working collaboratively on the content, group members can help or cannot help each other well to learn?

"Students can help each other a lot because they share the information". "In group work, students have to help each other." "Because when a student cannot understand a point, other members can help him or her and it is more effective than the teacher's help". "Students are not worried about being judged and they don't feel anxious".

"Because every one's perception is different and it could be useful to improve our understanding". "All of the members can help you to solve the problems and learn the course easily".

C) Why do you like or dislike working collaboratively to learn the content of the courses?

"I like to work collaboratively because it gives me new insights and a better understanding of the content". "More minds, more help, more options". "I like it because it is more profitable". "Collaborative learning can enhance my information about the subject matter". "I don't like it because sometimes group members do not cooperate". "In collaborative learning, all members of the group learn the content easily". "I have a deeper understanding if I think for myself".

3. Searching for themes. Ordering and connecting the related codes to shape the related themes were done.

4. Reviewing themes. The codes were reviewed to follow a coherent pattern.

5. Defining and naming themes. The themes were labeled. They included the social facet, the personal facet, the educational facet, and the emotional facet.

6. Producing the Report. Initial codes and emerging themes were reported.

Extracted initial codes were as follows: encouraging learners to have teamwork, producing hope and happiness among learners, communicating irrespective of gender differences with/without difficulty, being a member of a group with/without inferiority/superiority issues, tolerating/not tolerating the opposite ideas, working in the group with/without dominance by some of the members, prioritizing/not prioritizing group ideas to personal ideas, forcing some ideas into other ideas, social anxiety, the difficulty of shy people, low rate of participation for some, the important role of students, active/non-active role of the teachers, and its efficacy for language learning classes.

The third research question investigated the difference between male and female students' perceptions of the efficacy of CCL. The data collected from the questionnaire were analyzed by running an independent-samples T-test. Table 9 represents the descriptive statistics of male and female students in terms of their perceptions of the efficacy of CCL.

Table 9

Descriptive Statistics of Male and Female Students' Perceptions

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Group	Male	30	84.5	.105	.774
	Female	30	89.6	.623	.774

According to Table 9, the mean score of male participants, which was out of 120, was 84.5 and, the female participants' mean score was 89.6. So, an independent-samples t-test was run (Table 10).

Table 10

Independent Samples T-test for Male and Female Students' perceptions

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	FF	Sig.	t	df	Sig.	MD	Std. Error Dif	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	.647	.323	.55	29	.12	5.1	1.948	-2.515	3.948
Equal variances not assumed			.55	29	.12	5.1	1.948	-2.515	3.948

According to Table 10, the data of Levene's test for equality of variances revealed that it did not violate the assumption of equal variance as the sig value in Levene's test was greater than .05. Also, the sig value (2-tailed) was .12, which was

higher than the required cut-off of .05 ($t(29) = .82, \alpha = .05, p = .12$). So, it can be said that there was no statistically significant difference between male and female students' perceptions of the efficacy of CCL. Regarding the descriptive statistics, although female participants gained a higher score, the difference was not significant.

Results of the Interview

The fourth research question sought the challenges male and female students experienced regarding CCL. The data obtained from the focus group interviews were analyzed and coded according to the principles of grounded theory using MAXQDA software (Glaser & Strauss, 2012). Seventeen codes were extracted out of 37 codes for male learners. The following refers to the male learners' codes:

- a) "The teacher hardly ever motivates students to attend the group activities".
- b) "The students' unwillingness to participate in the teamwork is the educational system's inefficiency".
- c) "Students do not tolerate others' ideas".
- d) "Students have different learning styles and qualities".
- e) "The behaviors of some students affect the learning process".

Open codes of male learners and the number of their occurrences were as follows: Not being encouraged by the teacher (4), learners' various interests (3), lack of teamwork in the dominant educational system (4), the gender-separated educational system of Iran (6), lack of supervision, not respecting the opposite ideas (3), being bullied by some members (2), not considering personal ideas(1), not considering individual differences (2), social anxiety (5), inappropriate relationships among members (2), irresponsibility (1), better learning performance among females (4), time limitations among females (2), various learning types (3), personal performance (2), lack of communication outside of the educational system (1), lack of cooperation (1), lack of personal freedom (1), and not considering personal features (1).

The obtained data from female learners were analyzed and coded using MAXQDA software. They were classified to form codes. Twenty codes were extracted out of 37. The following refers to the female learners' codes:

- a) "The class is too crowded to have cooperative activities".
- b) "In any group work members criticize each other and they do not tolerate the criticism".
- c) "Due to cultural and religious norms, students have difficulty communicating with the opposite gender".
- d) "Students need constant encouragement to attend the group activities".
- e) "Some students can't express their ideas in the group".

Open codes of females and the number of their occurrences were as follows: A large number of students in the class (1), Not tolerating criticism (2), Weak self-confidence (2), Reluctance to teamwork (2), Poor communication with

the opposite gender (2), Shyness (2), Feeling superior (2), Personal beliefs (2), Not motivated by the teacher (1), Not encouraged by the teacher (2), Individual cognitive differences (4), Individual affective differences(3), Forcing their ideas (2), Difficulty in coming to a conclusion (4), Cultural taboos (1), Not setting the details of the teamwork (1), Not arranging clear goals (2), Unfair task division among the members (1), Inability in developing the discussion with the members (1), and Inability to convey their ideas (3).

After coding, it is vital to form bonds between the axial categories and the concepts dealt with them regarding their textual and conceptual aspects (Ary et al., 2010). For male learners, four categories were extracted out of the seventeen codes. The categories included methodological challenges, challenges with communication skills, individual differences, and gender-related challenges. For female learners, four categories were extracted out of the 20 codes. The categories included challenges with communication skills, methodological challenges, individual differences, and gender-related challenges. Finally, these sources of challenges were ranked. For male learners, the methodological challenge in CCL was the main challenge. For female learners, communication skills were the main challenge in CCL.

Discussion

This study investigated Iranian TEFL students' perceptions of and challenges in CCL across gender. The first research question, based on the quantitative study, sought to what extent participants perceived the efficacy of CCL. The results showed that about half of the students had the idea that CCL improved their learning; the highest contribution of the CCL was related to the negotiation of meaning and problem solving According to Chen et al. (2021), collaborative work results in learning better, having positive perspectives, and performing wiser, which is in line with the findings of the present study. Similarly, Colbeck et al. (2000) showed the participants' tendency for teamwork since they believed that it boosted their content learning, and Gatfield (1999) concluded that the learners who had experience with CL expressed a great level of satisfaction, suggesting that effective implementation of CL can create richer learning. These advantageous qualities can range from cognitive skill expansions to increased outlooks on scholarly works according to Sheridan et al. (1989). They also showed students' satisfaction with CL. These studies correspond to the findings of the present study.

The second research question, based on the qualitative study, sought the perceptions of TEFL learners regarding the efficacy of CCL. The results of the thematic analysis revealed four themes: social facet, personal facet, educational facet, and emotional facet. According to Silver and Bufiano (1996), the usefulness of CL is from interceding variables of group aims. By performing tasks acceptably positive perspectives about CL can be gained; it may influence the joint purposes of group members and leads to positive outcomes in group performance (Bandura, 1977). Dawson (2006) examined the relationship between students' mutual actions and their feeling indicating that students have stronger levels of success through interactions. These findings confirm the results of the present study in that it

revealed the emotional facet, as one of the obtained facets, by producing hope and happiness among learners and feeling good to be a member of a group, not an inferior or a superior, is one important element in students' perceptions of the efficacy of CCL. Torgesen et al. (2017) researched the effectiveness of CL. They concluded that one engaging approach for students is utilizing CL and providing them with clear guidance in strategy use. It corresponds to the results of the present study that revealed the importance of educational outcomes of CCL. Social presence is another indicator of learners' perceptions of the efficacy of CCL (Mayne & Wu, 2011). It is in the same vein as the findings of the second research question in that the social facet was introduced as one of the important facets in students' perceptions of the efficacy of CCL. So and Brush (2008) found a connection between students' CL and their success in the courses. It showed that learners who had positive perceptions of CL were more fulfilled with learning outcomes. According to them, high levels of CL affect the social presence of the learners. Edmunds (2012) argued that usefulness is a key aspect of students' perceptions of the efficacy of CCL. This confirms the findings of the second research question which revealed the important role of the learners in the process of CL, which was under the educational facet.

The third research question, based on the quantitative study, sought perceptions of male and female TEFL learners towards the efficacy of CCL. The analysis of the data ascertained no statistically significant difference between male and female learners' perceptions. Dewi and Muhid's (2021) study showed both males' and females' agreement on the positive role of CL in learning the content. Although there was a difference between their perceptions, it was not significant. Chiou (2019) noted that interaction between students is encouraged by group work that enhances their learning. It is in line with the findings of the present study. The findings of the present study also correspond to the results of a study conducted by Zhan et al. (2015) in that they found no significant difference in different genders. Hartman and Hartman (2003) reported women's positive perceptions toward group-work in comparison to men. It doesn't correspond to the findings of the present study.

The fourth research question, based on the qualitative study, sought challenges faced by learners during CCL. By analyzing the data from the interview, it revealed that for male learners, the main challenge was the methodological challenge, whereas for female ones the main challenge was the challenge with communication skills. As Harskamp et al. (2008) state, CL by interpersonal discourse can aid learners to dissolve learning difficulties. Female and male students have different communication styles so they may have different challenges. Other studies did not find any significant gender differences in challenges in CCL (Hargittai & Shafer, 2006). Ruta et al. (2013) showed that female learners prefer concurrent work with other members whereas male learners prefer solitary work. They showed females' tendency for CL at greater levels compared to males. These findings contrast the findings of the present study. Onah and Ugwu (2010) indicated that collaborative work depended on gender and there was a significant difference

between male and female learners concerning their challenges in CCL. Their study is in the same vein as the findings of the present study.

Conclusion

This mixed methods research investigated Iranian TEFL students' perceptions and challenges in CCL across gender. The positive perceptions of the participants suggest that by providing learners with experience of CCL, we can improve understanding, which offers support for the social cognitive theory of learning. Researchers within EFL need to consider the context of learning and be aware of the benefits of collaborative work in the classroom as the interactions can influence the productivity of learning. Through interaction and negotiation of meaning, students can improve problem-solving and improve retention in content learning. As Martinez et al. (2016) state, there is a connection between CL, enjoyable environment and activities, and academic achievements.

According to Sarobol (2012), CL simply doesn't imply assigning learners into groups and asking them to have a joint effort to achieve a joint outcome. Rather, it should be considered an efficient method in which learning increases (Muijs & Reynolds, 2005). Therefore, educating teachers to raise their knowledge of the efficacy of CL along with appropriate education of learners is very important (Al-Yaseen, 2012). Students should learn to be responsible for their learning. If one of the learners in the group cannot take responsibility, the other learners should retaliate and try to complete the assigned tasks (Sarobol, 2012). A very influential operant in the useful application of CL is increasing learners' awareness of some skills such as helping others, raising questions, giving feedback, and having a critical analysis of the process of CL.

For CL to be useful, the educator should see teaching as a process of boosting students' capability to learn. In the broad context of CL, an important element for learners may be consciousness-raising about what the group is accomplishing in content goals, how it is being accomplished, and whether it could be accomplished in more satisfactory ways. Learners should reflect on what it is about group learning that is supposed to help them learn the content. Individual expectations have to be negotiated with those of each group member, especially regarding gender differences (Chen et al., 2021) as they have different challenges in CL.

Future studies can different variables that can be influential in the CCL: Group combination, incongruous versus congruous group work, group size, CCL construction, and teacher interposition.

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Appendix A

Close-ended and Open-ended Questionnaire for Students' Perceptions of the Efficacy of CCL

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. Working collaboratively on the content can lead to better-quality work.					
2. Working on the content collaboratively takes longer to complete.					
3. I enjoy the material more when I work with other students.					
4. Working with others on the content makes me feel that I am not as smart as other group members.					

5. The material becomes easier for me to understand while working collaboratively on the content area.

6. Collaborative content learning leads to good grades in courses.

7. My grades depend on how much we all learn together on the content of the course.

8. The workload for me is less in working with others on the content.

9. It is hard to express my thoughts when I work collaboratively on the content.

10. What is fascinating for me is that I can solve the problems related to the content of the course by negotiating with group members.

11. I feel working in groups to learn the content of the courses is a waste of time.

12. What I like about working collaboratively is that it provides more opportunities to express opinions.

13. The content of the courses is more interesting for me when I work with group members on it.

14. When group members work on the content collaboratively, they get more elaborative information about it.

15. When I work collaboratively on the content, I can get the grades I deserve.

16. I like to work collaboratively because I can compare my strategies of learning with group members to improve them.

17. I believe learning the content with other group members is more efficient than learning alone.

18. Working collaboratively on the content is not challenging for me.

19. I think I learn more elaborately while working collaboratively with other group members.

20. Working collaboratively on the content gets on my nerves because usually group members say the same thing several times, which is a waste of time.

21. Collaborative content learning helps assignments get done on time.

22. Working in a group on the content helps me to focus on the task more effectively.

23. Working collaboratively on the content help me to do better in exams.

24. I do not have a positive attitude toward the effectiveness of collaborative content learning.

1. Why do you think that collaborative work enhances or does not enhance content learning?

2. Why do you believe that while working collaboratively on the content, group members can help or cannot help each other to learn?

3. Why do you like or dislike working collaboratively to learn the content of the courses?

Appendix B

Interview Questions About Challenges of Students in CCL

1. Did you face any challenges such as different styles of working or communicating, power relationships among members, differences in preferred communication style, or prior educational experiences in the collaborative content learning environment?

2. What were some challenges faced due to gender differences and individual beliefs in collaborative content learning?

3. What were the main problems that occur in your team when doing collaborative content learning?

4. How could you resolve differences in the cognitive and social abilities of your team members and their different ideas about their beliefs related to mastering the necessary techniques to achieve the goals of collaborative content learning?

5. What suggestions do you have for any challenges that you faced in the process of collaborative content learning?

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