Collaborative learning in English for specific purposes courses: Effectiveness and students' attitudes towards it

Dr. Najwa Saba 'Ayon
RHU-Rafik Hariri University, Meshref, Damour, P.O.Box:10, Chouf, 2010, Lebanon
faresns@rhu.edu.lb

Abstract. Despite the popularity of collaborative learning and its effectiveness on school students' learning and their classroom interaction (Gillies, 2008; Ghaith, 2003; Abram et al., 2002; King, 2000; and Johnson & Johnson, 1986 among others), there is a little empirical research of its effectiveness on university students. Aware of the importance of collaborative learning in preparing students for the workplace (Beckman, 1990), the researcher implements this teaching approach in two English for specific purposes (ESP) courses at a private Lebanese English-speaking university. However, a lot of her students are reluctant to work collaboratively. Therefore, the aim of this research study is twofold: to investigate (1) the effectiveness of using collaborative learning on (a) university students' learning as well as (b) their acquisition of essential skills required in the workplace and (2) students' attitudes towards working collaboratively. The researcher employs a qualitative approach and uses an instrumental case study as the strategy of inquiry to get rich, in-depth data. The researcher uses different data-collection methods: a self-completion questionnaire, focus groups and semi-structured telephone interviews. The data are analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. Appropriate recommendations are suggested both to increase the effectiveness of collaborative learning in these courses and enhance students' attitudes towards it.

Key words: Collaborative learning, English for Specific Purposes, workplace, higher education, Lebanon.

1   INTRODUCTION

In this paper, the researcher reports on her research, investigating her students' attitudes towards collaborative learning (CL), which the researcher employs in two advanced ESP courses, and their perceptions of its effectiveness on their learning as well as on their acquisition of job-related skills.

In the sections that follow, the researcher defines CL and provides a rationale for the study as well as a description of the context where the study takes place. Then the researcher presents her research questions followed by a review of the related literature to highlight the benefits of CL on students' learning as well as their preparation for the workplace. In section 4, the researcher discusses her methodology, data collection methods, and the plan of analysis. The researcher proceeds by presenting her findings, together with her discussions, and concludes her paper by suggesting some implications and a recommendation for future research.

1.1 Definition of collaborative learning (CL)

As CL is a key concept in this paper, a definition of how the author understands and uses this pedagogy becomes necessary. Different researchers define collaborative learning differently. Citing Johnson and Johnson (1996), Wang and Burton (2010, p. 2) define CL as "the

instructional use of small groups so that students work together to maximize their own and each other's learning". Gokhale (1995) defines CL as "an instructional method in which students at various performance levels work in small groups towards a common goal [and] the students are responsible for one another's learning as well as their own" (para.1). Moreover, Brown (n.d., p. 2), who uses CL interchangeably with cooperative learning or small group learning, defines it as a "technique designed to make learning a lively and successful process". According to Bonwell and Eison (1991, p. 2), CL is a strategy "that involves students in doing things and thinking about the things they are doing". All of these definitions emphasize the active involvement of students in small groups to construct their own learning.

Similar to the aforementioned researchers, the reseacher defines it "as a pedagogical practice in which students work together in small groups of two or more to complete a common task within the class session or outside the classroom for a certain period of time ranging between two weeks and a month depending on the complexity and the scope of the task" (Saba 'Ayon, 2013, p. 3). Like Gokhale (1995), Johnson and Johnson (1996), and Wang and Burton (2010) among others, the researcher aims to maximize students' learning when having them work in groups. Unlike Gokhale (1995), the researcher does not always select groups on the basis of students' performance; different selection criteria are used. As research in the literature does not provide one single recipe to follow, the researcher groups students either heterogeneously or homogenously (according to students' academic achievement), through self- selection or random assignment. This depends on her objectives. If she aims to ensure students' reaching their optimum potential, heterogeneous grouping is used as students working with more able students are challenged and can reach their maximum potential (Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, 1978). However, if the researcher is afraid of student's dependency on one student and other members become free riders, then she groups students based on their academic achievement. If the researcher aims to improve students' socializing skills and making new friends, then she assigns them in groups randomly rather than through self –selection because students are likely to select their friends to work with on the assigned project.

1.2 Problem and rationale

Aware of the importance of collaborative learning (CL) on school students' learning and their classroom interaction (Gillies, 2008; Ghaith, 2003; Abram et al., 2002; King, 2000; Johnson, et al., 1995; Shachar and Sharan, 1994; and Johnson & Johnson, 1986 among others) as well as on preparing students for the workplace (Beckman, 1990), the researcher implements this teaching approach in two advanced English for specific purposes (ESP) courses at a private Lebanese English-speaking university. However, a lot of her students seem to be reluctant to work collaboratively. Because there is not as much empirical research investigating CL effectiveness on university or college students as that on school students and because such research seems to be absent in the Lebanese context, the author aims to investigate from students' perspectives (1) the effectiveness of collaborative learning on (a) university students' learning and (b) their acquisition of essential job-related skills as well as (2) students' attitudes towards working collaboratively.

1.3 Context

The study reported in this paper takes place at a Lebanese Private English- speaking university. More specifically, the researcher investigates the attitudes of her students in two advanced ESP courses, namely Business Communication Skills and Technical Writing, towards CL and their perception of its effectiveness on their learning and their preparation for the workplace.

The main aim of these courses, each of which is 3-credits taught over a semester, is to prepare students to be professional communicators and team players in their workplace environments. To this end, the author, through the use of CL, helps students to acquire skills that are essential in their prospective workplace such as problem-solving skills, the ability to meet deadlines, negotiation skills, tolerance, critical thinking, social skills, and oral as well as writing skills among others. These courses are prerequisite for the students' internship training as well as for their senior projects.

Students in these courses are advanced English learners (Minimum TOEFL grade is 560). Most of them are seniors and some junior, yet sophomore students can enroll in these ESP courses as long as these students have passed the English prerequisite courses for these ESP courses. All business students are required to take Business Communication Skills, whereas engineering, graphic design, and communication and science information system students have to take Technical Writing.

As to the course objectives, students in these courses learn how to write and use different forms of job-related correspondence such as memorandums, e-mails, letters, instant messaging, curriculum vitae (CV), reports, and proposals. As communication can be done orally and/ or in writing, students also learn how to give professional presentations.

The main difference between these two courses lies in the topics selected to match the students' different majors. For example, business students are exposed to business management or marketing related topic, whereas engineering students are exposed to topics related to civil or electrical engineering.

2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following three questions guided this research study:
1. What is the attitude of the students toward working collaboratively with others in their ESP courses?
2. How do students perceive the impact of CL on their learning?
3. How effective is CL in preparing the students for the workplace?

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section is divided into two sub-sections, the first of which reviews some research studies on the benefits of CL on students' learning, and the other section reviews other studies depicting the importance of CL in preparing students for the workplace.

3.1 Benefits of CL on students' learning

A lot of research has confirmed the benefits of CL on students' learning. According to Johnson and Johnson (1986), collaborative teams do better in activities that require higher-order thinking and retain information longer than those students who work individually. In addition, these researchers assert that CL accommodates for individual differences in the classroom. Similarly, Abram, Scarloss, Holthuis, Cohen, Lotan, and Schultz (2002) and King (2002) state that CL can promote higher-level thinking. Ingleton, Doube, Rogers, & Noble (2000, p.6) highlight "the improvement in 'higher order' learning skills through peer collaborations" and list these skills as follows: "discussing, negotiating, interpreting, organizing, applying learning in new situations, clarifying, discarding, re-doing, [and] problem-solving". Citing Lalley and Miller (2007), Armstrong (2010, p.407)) asserts that "collaboration improves the quality of education and learning retention of students". Besides, Gokhale's (1995) experimental study on 48 undergraduate students at Western Illinios University reveals that CL (1) helps students to foster critical thinking as well as problem-

solving skills and (2) increases their learning interest. Likewise, Totten, Sills, Digby, and Russ (1999) list three advantages of CL on students: (1) engaging them in discussion, (2) taking responsibility for their own learning, and (3) becoming critical thinkers. Ghaith (2003) found that CL increased students' achievement on reading comprehension.

Not only does CL impact on students' learning, but it can also improve their classroom interaction and social skills. For example, Shachar and Sharan (1994) found that it increased task-related interaction among children than traditional classrooms; it promoted effective social communication skills among delinquent adolescent girls (Rutherford, Marhur, and Quinn, 1998); and it also increased acceptance of disabled children by their non-disabled peers (Kamps, Dugan, Leonard, and Daoust, 1994). According to Ingleton et al. (2000, p.8), CL has the "potential to provide students with a natural support system in an environment that many find overwhelming, uncaring, lonely or alienating".

Citing many researchers, Kreijns, Kirschner, and Jochems (2003) summarized the benefits of CL- some of which are presented earlier- as leading to "deeper level learning, critical thinking, shared understanding … long term retention of the learned material … opportunities for developing social and communication skills, developing positive attitudes to co-members and learning material, … building social relationships and group cohesion, … effectiveness of social construction of knowledge and … the development of competencies" (p. 337).

Brown (n.d., p.1), investigating university students' perceptions of CL, states that most students "claim to have derived academic benefits such as comprehension and improved performance, and acquired generic skills-enhanced communication and problem solving skills". Besides, almost half of the participants reported to have "gained social skills" (Brown, n.d., p.1).

Indeed, CL seems to have so many benefits that Gillies (2008, p. 329) states that "the evidence of its effectiveness is unequivocal."

3.2 Importance of CL in preparing students for the workplace

Not only are CL benefits felt in the classroom environment, they extend to the workplace (Beckman, 1990). In fact, CL "prepares students to deal increasingly with complex workplace problems and processes …" (Beckman, 1990, p. 128). Likewise, Musa, Mufti, Abdul Latiff, and Mohamed Amin (2011, p. 194), who surveyed 29 randomly selected second year university students, conclude that project-based learning, which is based on CL, "facilitates the transference and inculcation of workplace related skills among the subjects [participants] …such as team working, managing conflicts, decision making, and communication skills". Besides these skills, the researchers report that participants have become "more independent, confident, and productive in generating and discussing ideas" (Musa, et al., 2011, p. 194).

The M.I.T. Commission on Industrial Productivity concludes "'if teamwork is to be encouraged in the organizations of the future' … 'teamwork skills and experience need to be part of our educational programs'" (as cited in Beckman,1990,p. 129). According to Brown (n.d., p.2), "In a world where being a 'team player' is often linked with business success, CL is a very useful and relevant tool".

Besides, Ingleton et al. (2000, p.9) state that CL prepares "students in any discipline for the world of work". These authors provide a list of the skills that are fostered by CL and that are valued by employers; the list includes the following:
- *Cognitive skills such as the ability to analyze, evaluate and synthesize information*
- *Critical thinking and problem-solving skills*
- *Numeracy, literacy and visual communication skills*

- *Skills in interpersonal understanding, with the capacity to communicate effectively and to work both independently and cooperatively*
- *A commitment to continuous learning*

In a quantitative research using 2,050 university students, Cabrera, Crissman, Bernal, Nora, Terenzini, and Pascarella (2002, p. 20), who investigated "(a) gender and ethnic differences in terms of preferences towards CL, (b) effects of CL on student outcomes, and (c) determinants of openness to diversity", found that CL practices had positive impacts on each of the above mentioned areas.

In short, CL can play a very essential role in improving students' learning and in preparing graduates to meet the expectations of employers in the workplace.

4. METHDOLOGY AND METHODS

The researcher methodological stance is that of a social constructivist. The epistemological beliefs of the researcher are that knowledge is co-constructed with other participants in a social milieu rather than transmitted or imprinted on individuals. In other words, her intent as a social constructivist is to interpret the participants' meanings, attitudes, and behavior to arrive at an understanding of their world. That is why the researcher used a qualitative approach and employed interpretive methods that helped her gain deeper insights into students' perceptions of CL and their attitudes towards it. However, she used the self-completion questionnaire to get a picture of the wider situation across the participants, identify different phenomena among them, and then explore these phenomena in more depth during focus group interviews and semi- structured interviews.
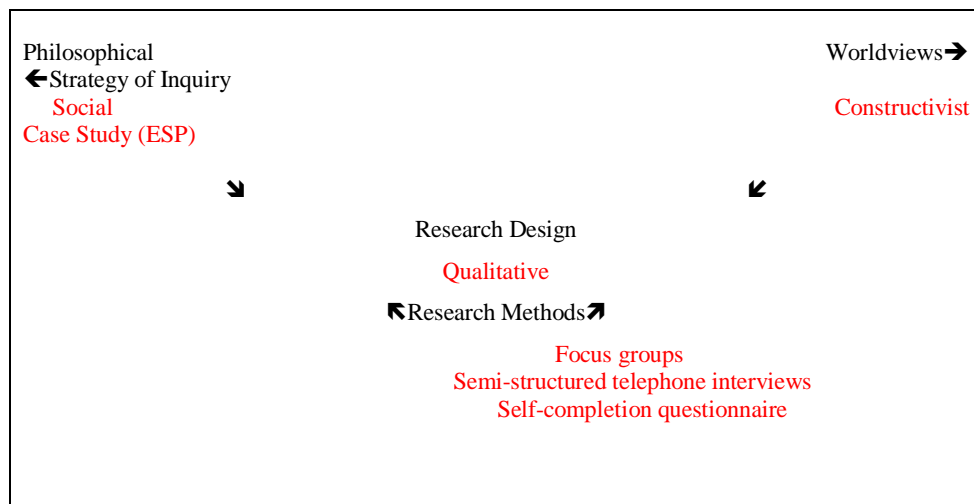

Figure 2.1 A Framework for Design- The Interconnection of Worldviews, Strategies of Inquiry, and Research Methods (Adapted from Creswell, 2009, p. 5)

The case study, which according to Yin (2009, p. 18) "is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context" and which provides "concrete context-dependent knowledge" (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 223), was her strategy of inquiry. The two ESP courses were taken as an instrumental case, which "plays a supportive role … facilitates our understanding of something else" (Stake, 2005, p. 445), that is to facilitate the researcher's understanding of students' perceptions of CL as well as their attitudes toward it.

4.1 Participants

Thirty-eight participants, who were promised confidentiality, anonymity, and non-traceability, were purposively sampled from pervious students who took either of the two ESP courses, Business Communication skills and Technical Writing. These participants are advanced English learners (Minimum TOEFL grade is 560). All of these participants, who were of both genders (23 females and 15 males), completed the self-completion questionnaire. These participants were of different majors (21 business, 16 engineering, and only1 Communication and Science Information System (CSIS)). The participants were also of different statuses: 13 graduates, 14 seniors, 10 juniors, and 1 sophomore. From what is presented, CSIS students and sophomores are the least represented in this sample. While it is justifiable not to have many sophomores in these two courses as these are the most advanced courses preceded by two other English courses, it is not the case for the CSIS major students except for their small number in comparison with the other majors and their reluctance to participate in this research although they seemed to be enthusiastic to do so at first.

4.2 Data collection methods

According to Yin (2009, p. 114), one major principle in case-study data collection is to "use multiple sources of evidence"; that is why the researcher employed the survey, the focus groups, and the telephone interview. As a social constructivist, the researcher analyzed "each source of evidence separately" and compared "the conclusions from the different analyses (p. 116) to allow different, non-convergent lines of inquiry.

4.2.1 Self-completion questionnaire

It consists of 27 items mostly multiple–choice and likert-scale with a few open-ended questions (4). These items are derived from the research questions that guided this research. The questions are clear, simple and specific enough to be understood by the students. The questionnaire has been piloted on two students who took one of the ESP courses and who accepted to take part in the study. Based on their feedback, necessary amendments have been made to the questionnaire.

4.2.2 Focus groups

Focus groups were used as they are invaluable when seeking "in-depth information about how people think about an issue-their reasoning about why things are as they are, why they hold the views they do" (Laws, 2003, cited in Bell, 2005, p.162; Cohen et al., 2007; Dornyei, 2007; and Bryman, 2008). The researcher conducted two focus groups of 13 participants in total who showed enthusiasm to participate in these groups. The first focus group consisted of 6 participants who were of different genders and majors (engineering, graphic design, and business) and who took these courses in different semesters. Thus, not all of the participants knew each other before, which could minimize digressions and encourage disclosure (Dornyei, 2007; Patton, 2002, and Krueger, 1994). The second one consisted of 7 participants who also consented to participate in this process and who were of different majors and genders too.

4.2.3 Semi-structured telephone interviews

To get deeper insights about the impact of CL on preparing graduates for the workplace and to explore possible similarities and/ or differences between the participants' responses in focus groups and those on the questionnaire, the researcher conducted two semi-structured

interviews with two graduate participants who were willing to take part in the interviews. Each interview lasted about 20 minutes during which the participants were cod switching between English and Arabic. Later, the researcher validated the transcriptions with the participants via e-mail.

4.3. Analysis

The data were analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively. The researcher used thematic analysis. When searching for themes, she looked for repetitions of topics, similarities and differences between the ways that the participants might have discussed a certain topic. She also examined the use of words like "because" or "since" as these might point to causal relationships in the minds of the participants. A special attention was given to analogies or comparisons that the participants might have used to render their thoughts, feelings, and attitudes concrete.

The researcher analyzed the quantitative data using SPSS file to determine the frequencies of each item on the questionnaire. To open-up, non-convergent lines of inquiry, the researcher compared the conclusions derived from the different analyses of the multi- sourced data.

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are presented in terms of the themes derived from analyzing the data.

5.1 Attitudes towards CL

Based on the collected data (questionnaire, focus group, telephone semi-structured), students have a very positive attitude towards CL. In fact, in the questionnaire all the participants except one rated their experience in either of the two courses between excellent, very good and good (97.3%) (See table 1 below).

Table 1: Experiences of the participants in the ESP course

	Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Excellent	9	24.3	24.3
Very good	16	43.2	67.6
Good	11	29.7	97.3
Bad	1	2.7	100
Very Bad	0	0	
Missing	1		

In the questionnaire the respondents also described their experience using collaborative learning as helpful (60.5%), enjoyable (44.7%), challenging (34.2%), unhelpful (5.3%), wasteful (2.6%), others (5.3%) (See table 2). In other words, many participants found CL as a helpful and enjoyable pedagogical practice. Even those who selected the other category justified their opinions by rating their experience as "fun and interesting". Similarly, in the focus group, all the respondents agreed that their experience was positive; they described it as "interesting", "beneficial", and "fun" yet "challenging".

Table 2: Participants' experiences with CL

	Frequency	Valid Percent
Helpful	23	60.5
Enjoyable	2	44.7
Challenging	13	34.2

Wasteful	1	2.6
unhelpful	17	5.3
Others	2	5.3

The open-ended questions on the questionnaire, the focus groups, and the interviews helped to get deeper understanding of the respondents' attitudes. For example, "challenging" was used to indicate both a positive as well as a negative meaning. Some participants indicated that their experience was a challenging one in a positive sense as reflected in what they reported, "to do your best for the best of the team", "selecting the right members and making the whole work coherent and unified", working with "a weaker member and encouraging, even forcing him to cooperate with me to achieve best work results", or working with team members "whom you don't know well, not your friends"; however, their attitude changed as they got to know each other and collaborated to accomplish their project, "at first we had boundaries between our classmates of a different field; we didn't want to interact with them because we didn't know them. At the end of the semester, these boundaries were broken. Now, everyone knows and talks with everyone in the class".

To other respondents, "challenging" indicated a negative connotation such as personal conflicts within the group members, "my partner refused even to give me his phone number, and never committed himself to an appointment"; lack of commitment from team members, "claiming that they don't have time"; and dependency on one member especially in the case of friends, "we are expected to carry their share and understand; otherwise, our friendship will be affected" as one participant said in a focus group, or "finding common time to meet".

One participant in the questionnaire described her experience as bad because as she stated, "I was overloaded with five other courses including four majors. I didn't have the energy or the time to give it to this course. That's why I didn't give my best and benefit from the material to improve".

A few rated their experience as unhelpful. One explained his attitude by blaming his group members for not being cooperative enough to accomplish the report, "I had a bad group [thus] our feasibility was a disaster, whereas it [his CL experience] was helpful and enjoyable when it came to writing the e-mail, memo, and letter". This same participant expressed in one focus group his preference to work in groups, "I still prefer to work in groups despite my bad experience once".

Other challenges the participants in both the questionnaire and the focus group named are "lousy work by other members" (26.3%) as well as the "lack of commitment from other group members" (31.6%). One participant in the focus group explained the first issue by saying "if partners didn't do their work properly, then it puts you behind. Instead of researching and summarizing sources, they copy and paste. Then, I have to give it back and ask them to revise and so on". "Another exemplified what meant by lack of commitment among other team members because they claim that they didn't have time or not interested in this subject, so they end up not doing the work and I had to carry the majority of the bulk because of the due date".

Overall, the participants had a positive attitude towards CL. Even those who reported a negative attitude or experience did not express preferences to work individually; however, their negative attitude was based on either their course loads during that semester or their partners who were not cooperative and dedicated enough rather than on their preferred learning style.

5.2 Impact of CL on students' learning

Only 13.2% of the participants indicated that their grades regressed. The others (47.4%) believed that their grades or course achievement improved and 28.9 % selected "no change" category (See table 3 below). However, all the participants during the focus groups believed that working together helped them learn from each other and produce better products and hence better grades.

Table 3: Participants' perceptions of the impact of CL on their achievement (grades)

Improved achievement	No Change	Slowed achievement
47.4%	28.9%	13.2%

Deeper analysis of the data collected from the open-ended questions on the questionnaire and the focus group could explain the discrepancy between the participants' answers. Those who selected the "no change" category were those students who were high achieving students and who worked with partners who were likewise or maybe pushed them to work as hard. That is why their grades were not affected; they retained almost the same grades. However, those who indicated regression of their grades had a different explanation. One of them wrote, "The teacher assigned the group members. My group members' contribution was minimal. I had to do most of the work which was exhausting. In the final presentation, I did well, whereas they performed poorly". Another participant in the focus group explained that "sometimes when I work with students who don't work as hard as me expect me to help them and they rely on me. This might regress my work". Another explained that "although our group did very well, better products [grades] are dependent on how to do the work. If partners don't do their work properly, then it puts us behind". In other words, the improvement of their grades was dependent on the other group members and the quality of their work.

Other than grades, CL had positive impact on students' learning. In the questionnaire, 52.6% of the participants indicated that CL helped them produce better products such as reports, letters, proposals; 57.9% selected complementing each other's weaknesses and strengths (see table 4 below). Likewise, four participants in the focus groups talked about complementing each other; one said, "We complemented each other. My partner worked on the design and colors as a graphic design student, and I did the part related to construction and renovation as an engineering student". Another participant emphasized "learning how to give feedback on each other's work". One participant reported that "overall it [their project] was much better than doing it alone". Another respondent said, "CL made it easier when you discuss ideas with other person".

Table 4: Impact of CL on the participants' learning

Better Products	Complementing strengths & Weaknesses
52.6%	57.9%

Besides, 65.8% of the participants indicated that CL facilitated the learning and teaching process in their course. However, 15.8% indicated that it slowed their learning and 13.2% selected "no impact" category (See table 5 below).

Table 5: Impact of CL on learning/teaching process

	Frequency	Valid Percent
Facilitated	**25**	**65.8**
Hindered/slowed	**6**	**15.8**
No impact	**5**	**13.2**
Others	**2**	**5.3**

In depth analysis of the open-ended questions on the questionnaire showed that those selecting "hindered/slowed" category are the ones who had problems with their group members, who reported that their members did not show enough commitment to the project and did not cooperate enough with them. One participant who selected the slowed category also wrote that CL facilitated his work with other members in class but not outside class while working with other members on their project. Even one of those who reported positively on CL experiences and who were in favor of working collaboratively (as shown in his answers on the questionnaire) selected "no impact" category. Probably, that participant might not have understood this particular question, which is one of the limitations of the questionnaire. Those who selected the "others" category wrote that "CL was very challenging yet facilitated his work", and the other participant explained that CL can facilitate the process "if members are of the same level, major, and are not friends but classmates".

Thus, students seem to perceive that CL facilitates their learning process as long as their team members are cooperative and committed enough to their learning as well as the learning of other members.

5.3 Impact of CL on helping students acquire job-related skills

The participants in the questionnaire indicated that CL helped them develop different job-related skills. The table below provides more specific details about the participants' responses on the questionnaire.

Table 6: Impact of CL on helping students acquire job-related skills

Team Player	Flexibility	Tolerance	Problem-solving	Communication
84.2 %	**80.6%**	**76.3%**	**73.7%**	**62.2%**

In depth analysis of open-ended questions, focus groups and telephone interviews confirmed the participants' perceptions on the questionnaire. One graduate participant wrote, "The course was a great experience for me, in which I learnt a lot of communication and technical skills that I still use today and every day in my job". Another graduate said "learning how to work in teams in our course made the job easier as all the work is done in teams". Another graduate wrote, "It [course] has provided me with enough information to start my career". One graduate wrote "CL in this course has improved my interpersonal skills, in addition to respecting different opinions and trying to find solutions that are suitable for every

group member". Another respondent who had a part-time job when she was taking the course said, "I was actually applying in my work what I was taking in the class". Another graduate wrote, "It's a great preparation for a productive career". Similarly, one participant in the focus group commented on the beneficial skills she gained from working collaboratively in the course to the extent that she is "applying the same strategy she learned in other courses".

Other participants in the focus group talked about gaining flexibility in finding time to meet with their group members and developing tolerance. They also learned how to solve problems. For example, one said, "When we did not find common free time to meet, we solved it by having each two partners meet and communicate with each other via what'sapp, e-mail, and viber".

6. CONCLUSION

The majority of participants have a positive attitude toward CL. Few seem to have reservations to CL depending on the group members and the teacher's support as explained by one senior participant in one focus group, "Your class is an exception; you deal very professionally; however, majority of students are trained by unprofessional teachers, who don't expect students to work professionally and don't provide support … If I have people like my partner in your class, I would enjoy working collaboratively with them". Even those who had a negative experience as a result of working with uncooperative team members seem to prefer and enjoy working collaboratively rather than individually; one senior participant said in one focus group, "I still prefer to work in groups despite my bad experience once". Thus, one key factor to students' positive attitude towards CL is the willingness of the team members to collaborate their effort to accomplish their project.

CL seems also to have a positive impact on students' learning. Their grade achievement, their written and oral work, as well as their learning process seem to be positively influenced by their collaborative experiences. In addition, CL is likely to help students develop job-related skills, namely team player, flexibility, tolerance, problem-solving and communication skills.

As a social constructivist, the researcher cannot claim generalization of the findings; however, the researcher asserts that the findings of this research study are both trustworthy (credible, transferrable, dependable, and confirmable) and authentic. By comparing the interviews, focus groups, and questionnaire, the researcher ensured credibility of the findings. As a case study research, the focus is on depth rather than breadth; thus, the rich data should provide enough information for others to make judgments about the "possible transferability of [these] findings to other milieux" (Bryman, 2008, p. 378). As to dependability, equivalent to reliability, the researcher tried to ensure that the transcripts were free from errors or misunderstandings by re-listening to the focus groups after transcribing them. Being reflexive helped to a certain extent to avoid having the researcher's personal values or biases "sway the conduct of my research" and the findings (Bryman, 2008, p. 379). In the presentation of the findings, the researcher tried to retain the voices of her participants by presenting substantive quotes said by them.

6.1 Further research

As this research was done on a small, non-probability sample not representing all the students who take these ESP courses, further research is recommended to get more insights about students' attitudes towards CL and the impact of this strategy on their learning as well as on their acquisition of job-related skills. Also, it will be quite interesting to investigate the role of gender, major, and/or status on students' attitudes towards CL, their perceptions of their learning and their preparation to the workplace.

7. IMPLICATIONS

Based on the above conclusions, the researcher recommends the following to increase the effectiveness of CL in these courses and enhance students' attitudes towards it.

1. Help students to get to know each other early in the semester and to develop social skills.
2. Familiarize students with the researcher's expectations of them when they are asked to perform tasks collaboratively.
3. Train students on how to collaborate with each other and how to give feedback on each other's work.
4. Allow students to select their group members rather than imposing certain grouping arrangements on them.
5. Encourage them to form their teams of non-friends as this is likely to reduce the obligation of carrying a friend's share.
6. Ensure individual accountability within each group by having them divide the tasks among the group members and indicate these tasks on their prepared work plan.
7. More follow up from the researcher as well as the team members on each team progress through group conferencing and students' reporting their progress on their projects regularly.
8. Encourage students to use alternative ways to communicate and not rely only on face-to-face meeting.

Acknowledgements

References

Abram, P., Scarloss, B., Holthuis, N., Cohen, E., Lotan, R, & Schultz, S. (2002). The Use of Evaluation Criteria to Improve Academic Discussion in Cooperative Groups. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 22 (1), pp. 16-27.

Armstrong, C. (2010). Catalyzing Collaborative Learning: How Automated Task Distribution May Prompt Students to Collaborate. *E-Learning and Digital Media*, 7 (4), pp.407-415.

Beckman, M. (1990). Collaborative Learning: Preparation for the Workplace and Democracy? *College Teaching*, 38 (4), pp. 128-133.

Bell, J. (2005). Doing your Research Project. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

Bonwell, C. & Eison, J. (1991). Active Learning: Creating Excitement in the Classroom (ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report No. 1). Washington, DC: George Washington University.

Brown, F. A. (n.d.). *Collaborative Learning in the EAP Classroom: Students' Perceptions*. Centre for Academic Development, Communication and Study Units. The University of Botswana:Botswana.

Bryman, A. (2008). Social Research Methods, (3rd ed.). New York: Oxford University Press.

Cabrera, A. F., Crissman, J. L., Bernal, E. M., Nora, A., Terenzini, P. T., & Pascarella, E. T. (2002). Collaborative Learning: Its Impact on College Students' Development and Diversity. *Journal of College Student Development*, 34 (1), pp.20-34.

Cohen, L., Manion, L. & Morrison, K. (2007). *Research Methods in Education*,(6th ed.).
London: Routledge.

Creswell, J. W. (2009). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods
Approaches* (3rd ed.). US: Sage Publications.

Dornyei, Z. (2007). Research Methods in Applied Linguistics. Oxford: Oxford University
Press.

Flyvbjerg, B. (2006). Five Misunderstandings about Case-Study Research. *Qualitative
Inquiry*, 12 (2), pp. 219-245.

Ghaith, G. (2003). Effect of the Learning Together Model of Cooperative Learning on
English as a Foreign Language Reading Achievement, Academic Self- esteem, Feelings of
School Alienation. *Bilingual Research Journal,* 27(3), pp. 451- 474.

Gillies, R.M. (2008). The Effects of Cooperative Learning on Junior High School Students'
Behaviours, Discourse, and Learning during a Science-Based Learning Activity. *School
Psychology International,* 29, pp. 328-347.

Gokhale, A. A. (1995). Collaborative Learning Enhances Critical Thinking. *Journal of
Technology Education*, 7 (1). Retrieved from:
http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/JTE/v7n1/gokhale.jtev7n1.html?ref=Saws.Org.

Ingleton, C., Doube, L., Rogers, T. & Noble, A. (2000). *Leap into ... Collaborative Learning.
Centre for Learning and Professional Development (CLPD)*. The University of Adelaide:
Australia.

Johnson, D.W. & Johnson, R. T. (1986). Mainstreaming and Cooperative Learning
Strategies. *Exceptional Children*, 52, pp. 553-561.

Johnson, D., W., Johnson, R. T., & Smith, K. A. (1995). Cooperative Learning and Individual
Student Achievement in Secondary Schools, in: J. E. Pedersen & A. D. Digby (Eds.),
Secondary Schools and Cooperative Learning, (New York, Garland).

Johnson, D. W. & Johnson, R. T. (1996). Cooperation and the Use of Technology. In D. H.
Jonassen (Ed.), *Handbook of Research for Educational Communications and Technology*.
New York: Simon and Schuster.

Kamps, D., Dugan, E., Leonard, B., & Daoust, P. (1994). Enhanced Small Group Interaction
Using Choral Responding and Student Interaction for Children with Autism and
Developmental Disabilities. *American Journal of Mental Retardation,* 99 (1), pp. 60-70.

King, A. (2002). Structuring Peer Interaction to Promote High-Level Cognitive Processing.
Theory into Practice, 41, pp. 33-40.

Kreijns, K., Kirschner, P. A., & Jochems, W. (2003). Identifying the Pitfalls for Social
Interaction in Computer-Supported Collaborative Learning Environments: A Review of
the Research. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 19, pp. 335-353.

Krueger, R.A., (1994). *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research*, (2nd ed.).
Thousands Oaks: Sage Publications.

Musa, F., Mufti, N., Abdul Latiff, R., & Mohamed Amin, M. (2011). Project-Based Learning:
Promoting Meaningful Language Learning for Workplace Skills. Procedia Social and
Behavioral Sciences, 18, pp. 187-195.

Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods* (3rd ed.). Thousands Oaks:
Sage Publications.

Rutherford, R., Marhur, S., and Quinn, M. (1998). Promoting Social Communication Skills
through Cooperative Learning and Direct Instruction. *Education and Treatment of
Children*, 21(3), pp. 231-233.

Saba 'Ayon, N. (2013). How to Incorporate Collaborative Learning in English for Specific
Purposes Courses. In *Proceedings from the First International ELT Symposium* (in press).
Istanbul, Turkey: Istanbul Sabahattin University.

Shachar, H. and Sharan, S. (1994). Talking, Relating, and Achieving: Effects of Cooperative Learning and Whole –Class Instruction. *Cognition and Instruction*, 12, pp. 313-353.

Stake, R. (2005). Qualitative Case Studies. In: N.K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, (3rd ed.). Thousands Oak: Sage Publications.

Totten, S., Sills, T., Digby, A., & Russ, P. (1991). *Cooperative Learning: A Guide to Research*. New York: Garland.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes. US: President and Fellows of Harvard College.

Wang, F. & Burton, J.K. (2010). Collaborative Learning Problems and Identity Salience: A Mixed Methods Study. *Journal of Educational Technology Development and Exchange*, 3 (1), pp. 1-12.

Yin, R.K. (2009*). Case Study Research: Design and Methods* (4th ed.). US: Sage Publications.

Najwa Saba 'Ayon is a Lecturer in the Languages and Humanities Department at Rafik Hariri University. She is the coordinator of academic English courses as well as ESP courses. She has a BA in English Language, a teaching Diploma in TEFL, as well as an MA in TEFL from the American University of Beirut and a Doctorate in Education from the University of Sussex, England. She has published and presented in national and international conferences on student motivation as well as EFL teachers' conceptions of teaching and their practice. She is interested in teacher training and development, ESP, intercultural communication, and preparation of professional communicators.