

The Contribution of Collaborative Learning to Speaking Ability and Speaking Anxiety Among Iraqi EFL Learners

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study investigated the contribution of collaborative learning to speaking ability and speaking anxiety among Iraqi undergraduate EFL learners. **Method:** Employing a quasi-experimental design, the study involved 86 second-stage students from the English Department, Faculty of Education, University of Kufa, divided equally into experimental and control groups ($n=43$ each). The experimental group received collaborative learning instruction over a treatment period, while the control group was taught using conventional methods. Data were collected using a speaking test and the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) administered as pre-tests and post-tests. Normality testing confirmed that parametric assumptions were met, and data were analyzed using paired samples t-tests and independent samples t-tests. **Results:** The findings revealed that the experimental group significantly outperformed the control group in speaking ability, with a mean post-test score of 64.57 compared to 48.23 ($t(84) = -9.48, p < 0.001, d = 2.05$). Furthermore, the experimental group demonstrated a substantial reduction in speaking anxiety, with a post-test mean of 48.34 compared to 64.23 in the control group ($t(84) = 9.04, p < 0.001, d = 1.97$). **Novelty:** These results indicate that collaborative learning not only enhances speaking proficiency but also significantly reduces speaking anxiety among Iraqi EFL learners. The study recommends the integration of collaborative learning strategies into EFL instruction to foster both linguistic competence and affective well-being.

INTRODUCTION

Collaborative learning (CL) is when students work together in groups to solve problems or complete tasks in their learning [1]. Cooperative learning is a student-centered, instructor-facilitated instructional strategy in which a small group of students is responsible for its own learning and the learning of all group members. These theories and research examine how people depend on each other and how this dependency affects their interactions in different situations, which may then influence the outcomes of their interactions. These ideas consider different ways people work together in groups, both in and out of the classroom [2].

In today's globalized world, the capacity to communicate in English has become increasingly vital. Among the various language skills, speaking is particularly important for students learning English. Parmawati emphasizes that speaking serves as the primary medium of everyday communication and is therefore the most critical English language skill. In practical terms, speaking ability is often the benchmark by which educators are assessed, as individuals tend to form first impressions based on how clearly and fluently others speak [3].

Speaking functions as a fundamental tool for exchanging information, conveying messages, and expressing thoughts through language. It involves the speaker's creative use of linguistic structures, vocabulary, and discourse patterns. Amalia and Husna assert that speaking is an essential competency because progress in language learning depends on learners' active participation in oral communication [4]. Effective speaking requires transforming words into coherent sentences, and the message delivered must be both appropriate and understandable to the listener. According to Haryudin and Jamilah, mastering speaking is one of the most difficult aspects of language learning, as it requires knowing when, why, and how to use grammatical forms and pronunciation – as well as when to refrain from using them [5].

In English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts, students often find it challenging to speak English confidently. Abdurrahman notes that all learners encounter difficulties when acquiring English. Some struggle to generate ideas or have limited time to express themselves due to fear of making mistakes. It is common for learners to revert to their mother tongue, which can become problematic if they are unwilling to use the target language [6].

Al Nakhalah identifies physical and affective barriers that hinder learners' speaking, including misjudged motivation, fear, anxiety, shyness, and lack of confidence. Fitri (2019) observes that many students experience difficulty with oral performance and are unable to speak in front of groups. When required to speak, they become frightened, anxious, and panicked. Their speech becomes hesitant, and they often refuse when asked to communicate in English. These challenges, according to the author, may arise from both internal and external factors. One factor of particular interest is anxiety, which is closely tied to motivation [7].

Anxiety represents a negative emotional state that can undermine students' efforts to learn English. Mauludiyah indicates that anxiety reduces engagement and may lead to outright avoidance of the language, negatively affecting learners' achievement both directly and indirectly through worry and timidity. It erodes students' confidence, heightens tension, and disrupts the learning process. When attempting to communicate in a foreign language, students inevitably face numerous difficulties. Speaking anxiety, in particular, has a significant impact on self-esteem, often resulting in feelings of defeat when learners are unable to articulate what they understand [8].

Chen defines anxiety as a set of interpretive emotions such as tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry linked to activation of the autonomic nervous system. Speaking anxiety causes learners to lack confidence when performing in front of others, which may prevent them from fully comprehending the teacher's explanations [9]. Anxious EFL students often fear embarrassment if they make errors and worry about producing language incorrectly. When asked a question, they become nervous and fear that their response will be wrong. If such anxiety is not addressed, it can have detrimental effects on students' learning outcomes. Students who cannot overcome speaking anxiety may struggle to master English altogether. Even when they understand a concept, they may remain silent and avoid responding due to nervousness, fearing that mistakes will

invite ridicule from peers. Consequently, educators need to develop approaches that reduce classroom speaking anxiety when students interact with peers or teachers.

Furthermore, Christy et al found that anxiety affects students' performance on speaking tests, identifying it as one of several significant factors influencing oral proficiency [10]. Hasibuan and Irzawati add that anxious students may suffer from low self-confidence, difficulty retaining information, excessive perspiration, and irregular heartbeats, which can lead to absenteeism and delayed assignments. Ultimately, such behaviors affect competence, as students with high levels of anxiety tend to achieve poorer outcomes than those with lower levels of anxiety [11]. When students experience significant language anxiety, their classroom performance is likely to suffer. They frequently experience mental blocks when speaking in front of the class, resulting in imprecise oral production.

Although the well-documented negative impact of anxiety on speaking performance and the established benefits of collaborative learning in general educational contexts, there remains a notable gap in the literature regarding the specific contribution of collaborative learning to both speaking ability and speaking anxiety among Iraqi EFL learners. While previous studies have examined the relationship between anxiety and speaking proficiency [10], [12], and others have explored the effectiveness of collaborative learning in various educational settings [2], limited research has investigated how structured collaborative learning interventions can simultaneously enhance speaking skills and reduce speaking anxiety in the Iraqi EFL context. Furthermore, existing studies have predominantly focused on either the cognitive or the affective domain separately, rather than examining the interplay between collaborative learning, speaking ability, and speaking anxiety within a single study. The Iraqi EFL context presents unique cultural and educational characteristics that may influence both the nature of speaking anxiety and the effectiveness of collaborative approaches. Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by investigating the contribution of collaborative learning to speaking ability and speaking anxiety among Iraqi EFL learners through a quasi-experimental design.

This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. Does Iraqi undergraduate EFL learners' speaking ability significantly improve when collaborative learning techniques are used in their classes?
2. Does Iraqi undergraduate EFL learners' speaking anxiety reduce when collaborative learning techniques are used in their classes?

Literature Review

Collaborative Learning and Its Principles

Collaborative learning (CL) lacks a universal definition but shares core characteristics [13]. CL emphasizes shared endeavor over individual work [14], requiring critical thinking and collaboration [15], [16]. In CL, students work together in groups to solve problems and complete tasks.

CL challenges learners emotionally and socially as they engage with diverse perspectives, defend opinions, and develop their own conceptual frameworks [17]. Teachers act as facilitators, designing student-centered activities that promote active

engagement [18]. CL is not simply students talking while working separately; it involves genuine collaboration [19].

CL differs from traditional methods in two main ways. First, its goal structure is collaborative rather than competitive or individualistic [20], [21]. Second, CL emphasizes student-centered learning with active peer interaction, unlike teacher-centered traditional approaches [21].

Lin [22] outlines six CL principles:

1. **Increase language practice** – Students actively use language through interaction.
2. **Raise discourse quality** – CL creates authentic social contexts for language use [21].
3. **Foster positive environment** – CL reduces fear of mistakes, enhancing learning [23], [24].
4. **Encourage social engagement** – Interaction builds communication skills [25].
5. **Permit independent thought** – CL develops critical thinking [26].
6. **Collaborative vs. cooperative** – Cooperative learning is structured with assigned roles; CL is spontaneous and socially oriented [27], [28].

CL in Practice

Collaborative skills can be taught through training in communication, negotiation, and conflict resolution [29]. Teachers should design tasks that encourage cooperation, define roles, establish interaction guidelines, and monitor progress [30], [31], [32].

Common CL activities include jigsaw (mixed-ability groups with expert members teaching peers) and student team learning (groups prepare together for team competitions) [32].

Examining Collaborative Learning Processes

CL evaluation purposes include measuring individual learning, collaboration capacity, group effectiveness, and collaborative skills [33]. Observational tools like conversational analysis classify student interactions into responsive feedback (elaborations) and non-responsive feedback (unanswered requests) [34], [35].

CL and Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

Vygotsky's ZPD describes the gap between independent ability and potential with guidance from more capable peers [36]. Learning occurs socially before being internalized individually. CL facilitates this by enabling peer mentoring, with language serving as a tool for cognitive development [22].

Challenges of EFL Learners in CL

CL challenges include unequal participation [37], student resistance to group work [38], individual differences [39], low interpersonal skills [40], pressure to conform [41], and logistical issues like workload distribution and scheduling [42].

Solutions include teaching interpersonal skills, clarifying goals, assigning roles, using rubrics, and addressing group development stages: forming, storming, norming, performing, adjourning [43], [44].

Review of Previous Studies

Collaborative Learning and Speaking Ability

The positive impact of collaborative learning on speaking ability has been well-documented across various EFL contexts. In a study conducted with 100 Iraqi EFL learners, Numan investigated the impact of group heterogeneity and homogeneity on oral performance through cooperative interaction activities [45]. The participants, classified into high and low proficiency levels based on IELTS scores and speaking tasks, were divided into heterogeneous and homogeneous groups. Following 12 treatment sessions of 30 minutes each, the findings revealed that learners improved their speaking skills through collaborative interactions regardless of group composition. Notably, the heterogeneous group outperformed the homogeneous group on the posttest, achieving average scores of 48.22 compared to 44.72, with pretest scores of 44.72 and 40.92, respectively. Crucially, the data indicated that lower-performing learners did not experience setbacks due to the presence of higher-achieving students; instead, cooperative interaction activities were especially beneficial for those with lower proficiency.

Similarly, Almadhady examined the role of small-group discussions in enhancing Iraqi EFL learners' speaking proficiency at the university level [46]. Using a pretest-posttest quantitative design, the study found that small-group discussions created a comfortable and safe speaking environment. The results revealed a significant improvement in speaking skills, demonstrating that interaction with peers who share the same mother tongue can create a useful and comfortable environment for speaking practice.

In the Saudi context, a large-scale study by researchers at Najran University surveyed 360 preparatory year students to identify EFL students' attitudes toward enhancing speaking skills through collaborative learning. Using a descriptive survey method with closed-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, the results showed that students held positive attitudes toward collaborative learning environments, reporting that such approaches significantly enhanced their speaking skills. The study also found that male students showed higher attitudes than their female counterparts, while students' study level did not impact their responses.

Further evidence comes from a study by Tu, who evaluated the impact of integrating WSQ-based flipped learning with cooperative learning on speaking performance among EFL learners [47]. Using a single-group quasi-experimental design with 15 tertiary-level learners over six weeks, the findings demonstrated significant improvements in speaking performance: average pronunciation scores increased from 10.33 to 13.47, oral fluency scores rose from 4.27 to 7.49, and speaking content length expanded from 147 to 229 words. All improvements were statistically significant at the 0.01 level, underscoring the efficacy of cooperative learning in enhancing oral proficiency.

Collaborative Learning and Anxiety

Alzurfi et al conducted a study among Iraqi intermediate EFL students at BA level. It was an attempt to consider Iraqi intermediate EFL learners' listening performance in CL, focusing on their attitudes toward contribution to the classroom. To achieve the study's goals regarding views on collaborative learning, 60 Iraqi male and female students, aged between 20-25, were invited to participate in the study [48]. The study was conducted at University of Kufa, College of Education, in Najaf, Iraq. The study's conclusions demonstrated that most participants thought collaborative learning was helpful for their learning. Furthermore, this study showed that collaborative learning strategies significantly impact the listening comprehension of Iraqi intermediate EFL learners.

The relationship between collaborative learning and speaking anxiety has also received considerable attention. Aydın investigated the effects of collaborative tasks on foreign language learners' speaking anxiety in face-to-face and online learning contexts. The experimental study involved 34 foreign language students using a questionnaire to measure speaking anxiety [49]. The results revealed that collaborative instruction significantly reduced speaking anxiety in face-to-face environments; however, no significant differences were found between face-to-face and online environments in terms of the impact of collaborative instruction on learners' speaking anxiety.

In a related study, Raymond and Ngui investigated how collaborative learning reduces ESL learners' speaking anxiety among 33 students from a rural secondary school in Sabah, Malaysia. Using a quantitative research design with pretest and posttest measures employing the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), the findings portrayed a significant decrease in learners' anxiety levels after the collaborative learning intervention. The majority of mean scores indicated that learners demonstrated a strong positive attitude toward the approach and perceived it as very effective in reducing their speaking anxiety [50].

Hedayati, Moghaddam, and Mirfendereski examined the effect of Structured Academic Controversy (SAC)—a specific type of cooperative learning—on alleviating foreign language speaking anxiety among 48 Iranian female EFL learners. Using a quasi-experimental pretest-posttest control group design implemented over three months, the experimental group performed SAC tasks through structured debates on controversial issues, while the control group performed traditional speaking practices [51]. The results revealed that SAC participants had significantly lower speaking anxiety and greater speaking confidence than the control group. The findings supported the notion that SAC creates a safe and cooperative atmosphere that reduces anxiety, promotes engagement, and develops speaking ability. The study concluded that creating a suitable educational setting where foreign language learners can cooperate positively with each other helps learners achieve their highest potential by reducing anxiety in speaking tasks.

Collaborative Learning in the Iraqi Context

Several studies have specifically addressed collaborative learning in the Iraqi EFL context. A study conducted at the University of Baghdad by researchers (2022) examined

the value of collaborative learning in developing students' listening and speaking skills. With 130 Iraqi EFL teachers from different colleges participating, the statistical data analyzed using SPSS version 24 showed that the correlation between collaborative learning and listening skills significantly developed students' other fundamental language skills. The results indicated that great attention is paid to reading and speaking skills while learning collaboratively.

Additionally, the Iraqi context presents unique challenges for EFL learners. Researchers have noted that the majority of Arab EFL learners struggle with speaking English fluency, with Iraqi students facing particular difficulties in speaking confidently due to mispronunciation, grammatical errors, pauses while speaking, and feelings of confusion in normal conversations. These findings underscore the need for effective pedagogical approaches such as collaborative learning to address speaking difficulties and anxiety in the Iraqi context.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a **quasi-experimental design** with a pretest-posttest control group structure. The design was selected to investigate the causal effect of collaborative learning on speaking ability and speaking anxiety among Iraqi EFL learners. The study involved two groups: an experimental group that received collaborative learning instruction and a control group that received conventional instruction. Both groups were assessed before and after the intervention using the same instruments.

Participants

The participants of this study were **86 second-stage undergraduate students** enrolled in the English Department, Faculty of Education, University of Kufa, in Najaf, Iraq. Participants were selected using **convenience sampling**, as they were accessible and available to the researcher. The participants were aged between **19 and 21 years**. They were divided into two groups:

Table 1. Demographic Information of the Participants

Group	Male	Female	Total
Experimental Group	18	25	43
Control Group	18	25	43
Total	36	50	86

Both groups were confirmed to be equivalent at the pre-test stage through independent samples t-tests, which revealed no statistically significant differences in speaking ability or speaking anxiety between the two groups prior to the intervention.

Instruments

Two instruments were employed to collect data for this study:

Speaking Test

A speaking test was developed to assess participants' speaking ability. The test required students to deliver a short monologue on a familiar topic within a specified time. The speaking performance was evaluated using a scoring rubric adapted from Brown, which assessed four components: pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and fluency. Each component was scored on a scale, and the total score was calculated as a percentage. The test was administered as both a pre-test and post-test to measure changes in speaking ability [52].

Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS)

To measure speaking anxiety, the study employed the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope [53]. The FLCAS is a 33-item questionnaire designed to assess anxiety specifically related to foreign language learning in classroom settings. Items are scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree." The questionnaire includes both positively and negatively worded items, with scoring reversed for negative items. Higher scores indicate higher levels of anxiety. The FLCAS was administered as both a pre-test and post-test to measure changes in speaking anxiety. For validation, three experts were invited from Kufa University, College of Education, who hold PhDs in English Language Teaching and have over 15 years of teaching experience. Cronbach's Alpha was used to estimate the reliability of the questionnaire.

Table 2. *Reliability Statistics for the FLCAS*

Subscale / Total	Number of Items	Cronbach's α
Total	33	0.87

Procedure

The study was conducted over a period of **12 weeks** during the academic year. The procedure consisted of the following stages:

Stage 1: Pre-test Administration (Week 1)

Both the experimental and control groups were administered the speaking test and the FLCAS questionnaire as pre-tests. The speaking test was conducted individually, and the questionnaire was completed in class.

Stage 2: Intervention (Weeks 2-10)

The experimental group received collaborative learning instruction for eight weeks, with two sessions per week. The intervention incorporated various collaborative learning activities, including:

1. **Jigsaw activities:** Students were divided into expert groups to learn different materials and then returned to their home groups to teach their peers.
2. **Small-group discussions:** Students worked in small groups to discuss topics, share ideas, and practice speaking in a supportive environment.
3. **Peer mentoring:** More proficient students assisted less proficient peers in completing speaking tasks.

4. **Group presentations:** Students prepared and delivered group presentations, receiving feedback from peers.

During the intervention, the teacher acted as a facilitator, guiding group interactions and providing support when needed. The control group, in contrast, received conventional instruction using traditional teacher-centered methods, including grammar explanations, drills, and individual speaking practice.

Stage 3: Post-test Administration (Weeks 11-12)

Following the intervention, both groups were administered the speaking test and the FLCAS questionnaire as post-tests using the same procedures as the pre-test.

Stage 4: Data Analysis

All collected data were analyzed using SPSS. Normality tests were conducted to ensure parametric assumptions were met. Paired samples t-tests were used to examine within-group improvements, and independent samples t-tests were used to compare the two groups at the post-test stage. Effect sizes (Cohen's d) were calculated to determine the practical significance of the findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Normality Testing

Table 3. *Shapiro-Wilk Test Results for Pre-Test Scores*

Variable	Group	Shapiro-Wilk (W)	p-value
Speaking Ability (Pre)	Control	0.967	0.218
Speaking Ability (Pre)	Experimental	0.958	0.142
Speaking Anxiety (Pre)	Control	0.971	0.301
Speaking Anxiety (Pre)	Experimental	0.963	0.187

Prior to conducting the main analyses, the assumption of normality was tested using the Shapiro-Wilk test for all pre-test scores across both groups. As displayed in Table 3, the p-values for speaking ability in the control group ($p = 0.218$) and experimental group ($p = 0.142$) were both above the conventional threshold of 0.05, indicating that the data did not deviate significantly from a normal distribution. Similarly, the speaking anxiety pre-test scores for the control group ($p = 0.301$) and experimental group ($p = 0.187$) also met the normality assumption. Since all p-values exceeded 0.05, the null hypothesis of non-normality was rejected, confirming that parametric statistical tests were appropriate for subsequent analyses. This finding justified the use of independent samples t-tests and paired samples t-tests to compare means within and between groups.

Homogeneity of Groups at Pre-Test

Table 4. *Independent Samples t-Test Results for Pre-Test Scores*

Variable	Control (M)	Experimental (M)	t(84)	p-value
Speaking Ability	42.67	43.12	-0.43	0.668
Speaking Anxiety	68.45	67.92	0.52	0.604

To ensure that both groups were equivalent prior to the implementation of the intervention, an independent samples t-test was conducted on the pre-test scores for speaking ability and speaking anxiety. As shown in Table 4, the mean speaking ability score for the control group ($M = 42.67$) was slightly lower than that of the experimental group ($M = 43.12$); however, this difference was not statistically significant, $t(84) = -0.43$, $p = 0.668$. Similarly, the mean speaking anxiety score for the control group ($M = 68.45$) was marginally higher than that of the experimental group ($M = 67.92$), yet this difference also failed to reach statistical significance, $t(84) = 0.52$, $p = 0.604$. These results confirm that at the outset of the study, there were no significant differences between the two groups on either dependent variable. Therefore, any differences observed at the post-test stage could be attributed to the intervention rather than pre-existing disparities.

Speaking Ability

Table 5. *Descriptive Statistics for Speaking Ability*

Time	Group	Mean	SD	N
Pre-Test	Control	42.67	8.45	43
	Experimental	43.12	7.98	43
Post-Test	Control	48.23	7.89	43
	Experimental	64.57	8.12	43

Descriptive statistics for speaking ability across both groups are presented in Table 5. At the pre-test stage, both groups demonstrated comparable mean scores, with the control group scoring 42.67 and the experimental group scoring 43.12. Following the intervention, the control group's mean score increased moderately to 48.23, whereas the experimental group exhibited a substantial increase to 64.57. This descriptive trend suggests that while both groups improved over time, the experimental group, which received collaborative learning instruction, achieved considerably higher speaking ability scores compared to the control group.

Table 6. *Paired Samples t-Test Results for Speaking Ability (Within Groups)*

Group	Mean Difference (Post-Pre)	t(42)	p-value	Cohen's d
Control	+5.56	-3.89	< 0.001	0.60
Experimental	+21.45	-15.23	< 0.001	2.35

To examine the significance of improvement within each group, paired samples t-tests were conducted. As shown in Table 6, the control group demonstrated a statistically

significant improvement from pre-test to post-test, with a mean increase of 5.56 points, $t(42) = -3.89$, $p < 0.001$. The effect size was moderate (Cohen's $d = 0.60$), indicating a meaningful but limited gain. In contrast, the experimental group showed a markedly larger and statistically significant improvement, with a mean increase of 21.45 points, $t(42) = -15.23$, $p < 0.001$. The effect size was very large ($d = 2.35$), suggesting that collaborative learning produced a substantially greater enhancement in speaking ability compared to conventional instruction.

Table 7. Independent Samples t-Test Results for Speaking Ability (Between Groups at Post-Test)

Variable	t(84)	p-value	Cohen's d
Speaking Ability (Post)	-9.48	< 0.001	2.05

To determine whether the difference between the two groups at the post-test stage was statistically significant, an independent samples t-test was performed. The results in Table 7 reveal that the experimental group ($M = 64.57$) significantly outperformed the control group ($M = 48.23$) on the post-test measure of speaking ability, $t(84) = -9.48$, $p < 0.001$. The calculated effect size was extremely large (Cohen's $d = 2.05$), indicating that the collaborative learning intervention had a powerful and practically significant impact on the speaking ability of Iraqi EFL learners. Collectively, the within-group and between-group analyses provide robust evidence that collaborative learning is more effective than traditional instruction in developing oral proficiency.

Speaking Anxiety

Table 8. Descriptive Statistics for Speaking Anxiety

Time	Group	Mean	SD	N
Pre-Test	Control	68.45	9.12	43
	Experimental	67.92	8.76	43
Post-Test	Control	64.23	8.89	43
	Experimental	48.34	7.45	43

Note: Lower scores indicate lower levels of speaking anxiety.

Descriptive statistics for speaking anxiety are presented in Table 8. At the pre-test stage, both groups reported relatively high levels of anxiety, with mean scores of 68.45 for the control group and 67.92 for the experimental group. At the post-test stage, the control group showed a modest reduction, with a mean score of 64.23, while the experimental group demonstrated a substantial decline, achieving a mean score of 48.34. These descriptive results indicate that although both groups experienced a decrease in speaking anxiety over the course of the study, the reduction was considerably more pronounced among learners who participated in collaborative learning activities.

Table 9. Paired Samples t-Test Results for Speaking Anxiety (Within Groups)

Group	Mean Difference (Post-Pre)	t(42)	p-value	Cohen's d
Control	-4.22	2.45	0.018	0.38
Experimental	-19.58	12.89	< 0.001	2.01

Paired samples t-tests were conducted to assess the significance of the reduction in speaking anxiety within each group. As displayed in Table 9, the control group exhibited a statistically significant decrease in speaking anxiety from pre-test to post-test, with a mean reduction of 4.22 points, $t(42) = 2.45$, $p = 0.018$. The effect size was small to moderate ($d = 0.38$), suggesting a limited impact. In contrast, the experimental group demonstrated a highly significant and substantially larger reduction, with a mean decrease of 19.58 points, $t(42) = 12.89$, $p < 0.001$. The effect size was very large ($d = 2.01$), indicating that collaborative learning had a strong and meaningful effect in alleviating speaking anxiety among learners.

Table 10. Independent Samples t-Test Results for Speaking Anxiety (Between Groups at Post-Test)

Variable	t(84)	p-value	Cohen's d
Speaking Anxiety (Post)	9.04	< 0.001	1.97

To compare the two groups on speaking anxiety at the conclusion of the intervention, an independent samples t-test was performed on post-test scores. The results in Table 10 reveal that the experimental group ($M = 48.34$) reported significantly lower levels of speaking anxiety compared to the control group ($M = 64.23$), $t(84) = 9.04$, $p < 0.001$. The effect size was very large (Cohen's $d = 1.97$), indicating that the collaborative learning environment was highly effective in reducing the anxiety that Iraqi EFL learners typically experience when speaking in English. Taken together, the within-group and between-group analyses provide compelling evidence that collaborative learning not only enhances speaking ability but also significantly diminishes speaking anxiety.

Discussion

The present study aimed to investigate the contribution of collaborative learning to speaking ability and speaking anxiety among Iraqi undergraduate EFL learners. The findings revealed that collaborative learning significantly improved speaking ability and significantly reduced speaking anxiety in the experimental group compared to the control group. These results are discussed in relation to previous studies and theoretical frameworks.

Collaborative Learning and Speaking Ability

The first research question sought to determine whether Iraqi undergraduate EFL learners' speaking ability significantly improves when collaborative learning techniques are used in their classes. The results demonstrated a statistically significant improvement

in the experimental group's speaking ability, with a very large effect size ($d = 2.05$). This finding **agrees with** previous studies conducted in similar contexts.

The present study's findings are consistent with **Numan**, who found that collaborative interactions improved Iraqi EFL learners' oral performance, with heterogeneous groups showing the greatest gains. Similarly, the results align with **Almadhady**, who reported that small-group discussions created a comfortable and safe speaking environment that enhanced speaking proficiency among Iraqi university students. The current study extends these findings by demonstrating that collaborative learning not only improves speaking ability but does so with a very large effect size, underscoring the practical significance of the intervention [45], [46].

Furthermore, the findings **support** the results of **Tu**, who documented significant improvements in pronunciation, fluency, and speaking content length following cooperative learning interventions. The present study similarly observed substantial gains across speaking components, as reflected in the overall speaking test scores [47].

The positive impact of collaborative learning on speaking ability can be explained through the theoretical lens of **Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)** (Vygotsky, 1978). In the collaborative learning setting, more proficient peers served as mentors, providing scaffolding that enabled less proficient learners to perform beyond their independent capabilities. This peer-mediated learning process, facilitated through discussion, negotiation, and shared problem-solving, allowed students to internalize language skills that they could later apply independently.

Additionally, the principles of collaborative learning outlined by **Lin**—particularly increased language practice, raised discourse quality, and a positive learning environment—were likely operational in the experimental group. Students had ample opportunities to practice speaking in authentic contexts, engage in meaningful interactions, and receive immediate peer feedback, all of which contributed to enhanced oral proficiency [22].

Collaborative Learning and Speaking Anxiety

The second research question examined whether Iraqi undergraduate EFL learners' speaking anxiety reduces when collaborative learning techniques are used in their classes. The results demonstrated a statistically significant reduction in speaking anxiety in the experimental group, with a very large effect size ($d = 1.97$). This finding **agrees with** several previous studies.

The present study's results are consistent with **Raymond and Ngui**, who found that collaborative learning significantly decreased ESL learners' speaking anxiety in a rural Malaysian secondary school context. Similarly, the findings **support Hedayati, Moghaddam, and Mirfendereski**, who reported that Structured Academic Controversy (SAC)—a cooperative learning approach—significantly reduced foreign language speaking anxiety among Iranian EFL learners by creating a safe and cooperative atmosphere [50], [51].

The present study also **agree with Aydın**, who found that collaborative instruction significantly reduced speaking anxiety in face-to-face environments. The

current study, conducted entirely in face-to-face classroom settings, similarly demonstrated that collaborative learning creates conditions conducive to anxiety reduction [49].

However, the findings **partially contrast with Aydın** in one respect: while Aydın found no significant differences between face-to-face and online environments in anxiety reduction, the present study focused exclusively on face-to-face settings and demonstrated a very large effect size, suggesting that face-to-face collaborative learning may be particularly effective in the Iraqi cultural context where interpersonal interaction is highly valued.

The reduction in speaking anxiety can be attributed to several factors inherent in collaborative learning. First, the **positive learning environment** fostered by CL [22], [24] reduced students' fear of making mistakes, as errors were viewed as natural parts of the learning process rather than as public failures. Second, the **small-group structure** provided a supportive space where students could practice speaking without the pressure of addressing the entire class. Third, **peer support** and shared responsibility alleviated individual performance pressure, as students realized they were not alone in facing challenges [51].

Notably, the control group also experienced a statistically significant reduction in speaking anxiety, albeit with a small to moderate effect size ($d = 0.38$). This may be attributed to familiarity with the testing environment or natural maturation over the course of the study. However, the magnitude of reduction in the experimental group was substantially larger, confirming that collaborative learning has a uniquely powerful effect on alleviating speaking anxiety.

CONCLUSION

Fundamental Finding : This study investigated the contribution of collaborative learning to speaking ability and speaking anxiety among Iraqi undergraduate EFL learners. Employing a quasi-experimental pretest-posttest control group design with 86 second-stage students from the University of Kufa, the study found that collaborative learning had a statistically significant and practically significant positive impact on both dependent variables. The findings revealed that the experimental group, which received collaborative learning instruction, demonstrated a substantial improvement in speaking ability compared to the control group, with a very large effect size ($d = 2.05$). Additionally, the experimental group showed a significant reduction in speaking anxiety, with a very large effect size ($d = 1.97$). These results confirm that collaborative learning not only enhances oral proficiency but also alleviates the affective barriers that often hinder language learning. **Implication :** The theoretical implications of this study support Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and sociocultural theory, demonstrating that learning is mediated through social interaction and peer collaboration. The practical implications suggest that EFL educators in Iraq and similar contexts should integrate collaborative learning strategies into their teaching practices to create supportive, interactive, and anxiety-free learning environments. **Limitation :**

The study was limited to a specific sample of 86 second-stage students from the University of Kufa, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to other educational contexts or proficiency levels. Additionally, the duration of the treatment and reliance on quantitative measures may not fully capture long-term effects or deeper qualitative aspects of learners' experiences. **Future Research :** Future studies should explore the long-term impact of collaborative learning on speaking ability and anxiety across different educational levels and cultural contexts. Further research is also recommended to incorporate mixed-method approaches to gain deeper insights into learners' perceptions, interaction patterns, and the mechanisms underlying anxiety reduction.

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